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BY

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AUTHOR OF "BEFORE THE WIND"

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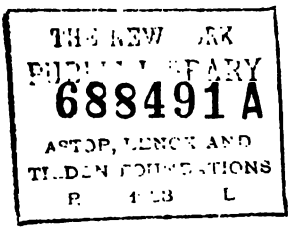

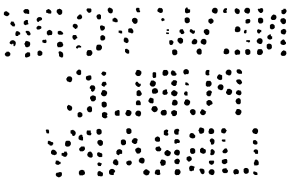

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AMONG THE ACCURSED
THIS BOOK
IS DEDICATED

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THE MAN WITH THE LAMP

PROLOGUE

IN WHICH, NEAR A GREAT SEA-GATE, ONE FINE AFTERNOON, TWO WAYS PART

Amid a blaze of flowering gorse in sunshine, towards the evening of a glorious day in the May of 1914, two men sat in a grassy nook, on a headland about five miles from Rathness, looking out upon the North Sea.

Far down below them the tide was coming in, and they could hear the swish of the waves as they crept up among the boulders. Larks were singing over the fields above them; bees were humming all around them. They themselves, however, had not uttered one word, either good or bad, for about an hour and a half.

The elder of the two was already in his forties and looked older than he need have done because of the wear and tear to which his mind had ever subjected his bodily frame, and shabbier than was necessary because of his disregard for all the conventions of this earth. He sat, folded up, his chin on his knees, his hands clasping his legs, gazing out over the water. His steel-blue eyes were weary and strained, his clean-shaven face was thin and lined. But there was triumph and exultation in his expression as he stared fixedly and unseeingly at the far distance.

The fair-haired grey-eyed boy at his side was only half his age and looked even younger. In contrast to his companion he was well-dressed, though, at the moment, his tweed garments showed signs of having had what his friend called a

day with Nature. He had forced his way through bramble-brakes, slipped on mud, waded knee-deep through seaweed, and scaled crags to get to this present eyrie. The state he was in, however, troubled him not at all, for, during the past six months, he had become used to such adventures.

He was very good to look at, lean, lithe, and clean-limbed, yet with a soupçon of what some call the artistic about him. This manifested itself not in his clothes, not in his hair, but, as though in spite of him, in the fine lines of his head and face, and more especially in his slim strong hands, for he had been born and bred a pianist.

The autumn before, James Carruthers, the elder man, had been travelling through Europe in a very bad temper. A pupil was accompanying him, and James who, as a rule, succeeded in handing back his charges more interested in things at large than he had received them, was, to his intense disgust, totally failing in this instance. Nothing in Europe or in James seemed to appeal to the youth in hand. Nothing in him appealed to James. Anything, therefore, being welcome, which offered a chance of escape from a tête-à-tête which had become irksome, James gladly accepted an invitation, extended to himself as well as his pupil, to visit a Baron Von Lauenhain, at his Schloss, in the Franconian Forest. Here he had met Martin Ascher, the orphan nephew of the host, who had, nevertheless, been educated in England, until, some years before, at his urgent request, he had been sent to Berlin to study music. From thence he had just returned on the verge of a nervous break-down from overworking, and hearing this, James, who was an enthusiastic music-lover, as well as an incorrigible over-worker, was immediately attracted.

That evening, when Martin played, he completed a conquest. Orpheus-like he charmed away the tutor's grim and bearish humour, and next day when they walked and talked together in the forest, James was even more charmed. Martin's brilliant gift, his quick perceptiveness, his rare simplicity, won first the keen interest of his new friend and then

his difficult affection. Martin, for his part, soon realised that never before had he met anyone quite like James, and he began to discuss freely with him any and every kind of subject.

James, as was his wont, responded by introducing him to new vistas of thought, new planes, new worlds, and when at last, as intimacy ripened, he came to speak of his own visions, Martin was altogether fascinated and absorbed.

The two became inseparable. The pupil, utterly neglected, had the time of his life. He went shooting with the baron, and learned not a word of German.

"Which doesn't matter one bit," James remarked to Martin. "The fewer languages a fool like that knows, the better."

In spite of this reprehensible conduct of James's, however, the baron, at the close of their visit, asked him to take Martin back with him.

"I want him to brush up his English," he explained, himself speaking faultless English, "and to see something of your beautiful Scotland. And——" he added aside, "to get his nerves into order again, for he is the image of his mother who died of her nerves—poor thing."

Martin, desperately anxious to return to Berlin, consented nevertheless willingly enough to pass his enforced holiday with this unusual, not to say amazing tutor.

"Never fear, my boy," James had said to him privately, reading in his eyes the misery of baulked desire, "I have an excellent piano, and you shall practise day and night if you like, the more the better, so far as I am concerned."

The brushing-up of the language he neglected altogether for the very good reason that it was not required. Martin had been to Rugby and Cambridge and, save for a more lingering and distinct pronunciation of certain consonants, so slight as to be hardly perceptible, he spoke English as well as his tutor.

James therefore concentrated at once upon the nervous malady.

"He is as strong as a horse, physically," he soliloquised, when he had made his observations. "All he wants is to escape from himself—from what he *thinks* is himself—nerves included."

Then, in his own peculiar manner, he proceeded to show his charge Scotland. Martin saw and delighted in the dilapidated old house where James lived. He saw Rathness. He saw the coast-line of low cliffs and crumbling rocks and green slopes, that sweeps round from the bay of the little grey town to the mouth of the river-avenue that leads to the gates of Edinburgh. He saw battleships from the naval base at Rosyth pass by like ghosts in the distance, bent, night and day, never ceasing, never resting, upon their task of guarding the heart of Scotland.

An in-lander from the centre of a continent, ships and boats had always fascinated him. Soon he became hand in glove with the fishermen. Often he would be with them whole days and nights, and in one cottage in particular—Old Sandy's cottage among the dunes, and so near the waves that it seemed to be ever full of the stir and whisper of them, he had been at home at all times. He had been dubbed the mate of the old yawl, the "Petronella," which sometimes, manned by the two sons Sandy and Willie, and David Craig, the son-in-law of the house, sailed out past the Isle of May, which, like some giant dreadnought ever at anchor, dim by day and flashing by night, lay watching the entrance to the great estuary. They would fare forth then into the open sea, which, jesting, he had been wont to say must belong to him, since it was called the German Ocean. O' nights too he would tell them about the Lauenhain, would talk German to them, teach them words, and sing them songs—the Erl King or the Lorelei. . . . Thus, carrying out James's programme, he came gradually out of himself, though James took little part in the performance. At times indeed he clearly indicated that he would prefer to be left in solitude. At other times, however, he would require his charge to accompany him in what he called expeditions into the unseen.

They had had weird experiences together, and strange nights of wandering, for times and seasons were as naught to James. Often they had seen the sun rise over the far mountains, many a time watched the moon sink into the sea. . . .

But now a sadness of farewell was upon Ascher, for he had said good-bye to the cottage among the dunes.

"No—you can't go back that way," his guide had said to him that morning. "You must say good-bye now, while I go forward and wait for you on the rocks, because to-night there will be no time. I want you to play to me all this last night."

It was at the dawning that he had seen his fisher-folk for the last time—the old mother bent over a great fire of driftwood, busy cooking breakfast for her two stalwart sons, her weather-beaten face, beautiful with kindness and contentment, lighting up as ever at his coming—Sandy and Willie hailing him with enthusiasm, and disappointed that he was not coming with them in the boat—David Craig's wife, Jess—gallant little quick-tempered woman—helping her mother to lay the table and ordering everybody about—Old Sandy, too old to do aught but beam upon everybody, and give advice that was sometimes listened to and sometimes not. . . . How they had all crowded round him, shaken him by the hand, wished him a good journey, and some day a safe return to them! . . . He saw them all again and heard their hearty voices as his gaze rested mournfully where the blue sky met the water.

"Of what are you thinking?" said his companion suddenly.

He looked round and found the tired eyes resting keenly yet kindly upon him.

"Of going away," he replied. "Of parting."

There was a moment's silence.

"And it makes you sad," said Mr. Carruthers.

"It makes me sad," replied Martin.

"It oughtn't to," said James. "If you were a right minded youth you would be thankful to be getting away from me.

For—I freely confess it, Ascher—I have been an execrable tutor to you. I have made you talk to me for my amusement instead of teaching you. I have made you play to me for my pleasure instead of making you read. I have never even read to you or caused you to read the daily papers. I ask your forgiveness."

"Forgiveness!" cried Martin. "Forgiveness, sir, for having given me what has been the happiest time of my life since I was a child with my mother in the forest? Never since—even at the Lauenhain, though I love it, as you know, have I been so happy."

"Never at your music?" said James.

"Ah—that is different," was the reply.

James laughed.

"And now you are going back to it, eh?—back to be a great musician?" he said.

"I mean at least to work hard, sir," said Ascher.

"Bah! Hard work!" exclaimed James. "Let loose your soul and the work will be mere child's play."

Ascher was silent, looking out again across the bay, knowing well that it was no use contradicting.

"But if you are so sorry to go," said James after a moment, "why do you do it?"

"Because I must get back to it all," said Martin. "I cannot stay longer idling here." He clasped and unclasped his hands with a quick movement.

"But why idle?" said James, watching him curiously. "Have we not masters here, have we not music—not so far from Rathness—in London—in Edinburgh?"

Martin did not answer, but, as James had expected, he politely repressed a smile.

"I see," said James, "it's because you despise us—both our music-masters and our music."

"No, no, sir!" Martin protested laughing, but James persisted.

"You do," he said.

"Well, sir—if you *will* have it!" said Martin lightly. "You

see—in music we have—traditions. Surely you British grant us that—you who in all else have such great possessions."

"My dear boy," said James, "of course we do, however grudgingly, because we have to. Your Beethoven and Schumann and Brahms and the rest are too much even for our self-complacency. But, Ascher," he went on after a moment's pause, "are your people, the present generation I mean, as—as they used to be in the old days? Somehow, of late, when I have been in Germany, I have wondered——"

He broke off suddenly, and sat frowning at the sea in silence.

"The present generation doesn't trouble me, sir," said Martin. "In Berlin I live a life apart—with the Immortals."

"I believe you," said James. "But the present-day Mortals may have to be reckoned with all the same."

"Perhaps," said Martin, "but my business with them will be merely that of an interpreter. I myself will not have to reckon with them. I shall leave that to the Immortals themselves. What I have to do is simply to prepare myself for my part. These great ones will do the rest."

His eyes grew dreamy, while James sat watching him, his own face set for the moment in rather grim lines.

"So you must go," he said at last.

"And by God they need you, and such as you, over there," he added. "They need you to remind them of what has been, to save them from themselves, and from the plots of that mad Kaiser of theirs."

"Take care, sir!" said Martin, saluting at the word, half in jest and half in earnest. "Remember he is my Kaiser too!"

Then, as James did not reply, he added—"I would have had to go now anyhow, sir. My uncle, you know, desires it."

"So it seems," said James. "He orders you as though he were your commanding officer. By the way, you have served your time in the army, I suppose?"

"Yes—thank God that's over," said Ascher.

"You disliked it?"

"I hated it."

"Then thank God it's over," repeated James. "But about your return to your country—to Germany. Your uncle seems very peremptory and urgent about it."

"Very urgent," said Ascher.

"I don't like your uncle," said James.

"Nor do I, sir," said Ascher. "I cannot understand how he came to be my mother's brother. She was so fine—so—so—different."

"She must have been," said James.

Ascher did not hear him.

"And an artist to her finger-tips," he went on. "Ah, you should have heard *her* play, sir! It is from her I have my——"

"Your splendid gift," James broke in. "Your rare genius. Ah—some day—if you can do what I have told you—if you can let loose your soul—you will be the world's greatest pianist. Mark my words. I, James Carruthers, have said it."

Ascher laughed.

"And you, sir?" he retorted.

"I shall be the world's greatest Investigator for the moment," said James.

"You are optimistic to-day, sir," said Ascher, smiling.

"I have reason for my optimism," was the grave rejoinder.

Ascher turned towards him in surprise.

"The meaning of one of my visions has been explained to me," said James, his tired eyes kindling. "It is not a vision at all, it is a memory, a Soul-Memory—that has been retained by my Greater Personality—through the ages—through many incarnations. Ascher, my boy—I believe that this is a day of departure for me too. I believe that I am on the eve of a tremendous series of discoveries."

"Do you indeed, sir?" exclaimed Ascher, eagerly.

"You know, of course, who the Minoans were?" said James, fixing his gaze upon his pupil.

"I have never heard of them, sir," said Ascher.

"You are abysmally ignorant, I fear," said his preceptor. "Have I never mentioned Minoans to you?"

"Never, sir," said Ascher.

"I have mentioned the Vision I mean, however," said Mr. Carruthers. "I mean the one of the strange figure like a hatchet that I see carved upon a stone wall—in a glare of sunshine, with an inscription beneath it which I cannot read, and which is neither in Greek nor in Latin. It has recurred often since I first saw it in my early childhood. My grandfather was interested in it. 'Never mind about examinations, Jimmy,' he would say. 'Don't you pin yourself down to any special subjects. You keep your mind free and open for that Vision of yours. It may make you a famous man yet.' . . . My father did not agree with him, and that has delayed me considerably. But no matter—what do you think I came across yesterday in a book shown to me by chance by Professor Swanwick—and sent to him by a friend, who is in Crete, excavating? Ascher, I can hardly believe it yet, I found my Vision there."

"You found it, sir?" exclaimed Ascher, afire with interest.

"I found a picture of the strange hatchet-like figure," said Mr. Carruthers, "exactly the same as I see it, only without the glow and colour. And I am now convinced, as I have told you, that my Vision is not a vision at all. In some former life I have been a Minoan, a dweller—a humble dweller perhaps—but still a dweller in one of the magnificent palaces of Knossos built by the descendants of men who were living and working in Crete—think of this, my boy—thousands of years before the Garden of Eden was thought of!"

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Ascher. "You make my brain reel, sir!"

"Let it reel!" said Mr. Carruthers. "It will do it good, if the experience shows it that there are other points of view besides those to which it is accustomed. But listen to this, Ascher, for all that I have said yet is as nothing to

what I am now about to tell you. The figure I have seen so often carved in stone is the double axe—a symbol used as a mark of power and royalty by the Minoan kings and queens. But, under the figure, you remember, I see an inscription which, though plainly written, is as incomprehensible to me as the writing on the wall at the feast was to King Belshazzar. I cannot understand it, and no wonder. No one can, Ascher! No one in the world at present. The inscription is in an unreadable language."

"Unreadable?" said Ascher.

"Yes, and for this reason," said Mr. Carruthers. "No double inscription has ever been found, as in other cases, in which the same words have been written side by side in two languages, one of which is known. No monument has been discovered like the Rosetta stone by which the hieroglyphics of Egypt were interpreted. The world still awaits the revelation of the meaning lying behind those strange characters for the most part inscribed on tablets of clay, which have been hardened and thus preserved to us by the flames of a great catastrophe."

"A great catastrophe?" said Ascher, awestricken, his quick imagination looking down the ages. "How did it happen, sir?"

"It is not known," said Mr. Carruthers. "The Minoans were a great sea-power. They ruled the seas as Britain does now, and it is probable that their land army—as they say ours is now—was insufficient to protect them when a hostile landing took place. Some other power must have met and conquered their navy, surprised the palace, overpowered its guards, and set fire to it. That is certain."

"Strange," said Ascher, "and all the passion and terror and horror of what happened are now as though they had never been? They have left no record?"

"No," said James, "except one thing perhaps—the stone pedestal of a lamp, which was found, set as though in haste, on the sill of a staircase-window. . . . One wonders whether the man, who was carrying it, escaped. . . . But what I was

going to say was—that in the awful holocaust—along with who knows what exquisite and priceless things—all hope of finding out the meaning of the script by ordinary means has apparently for ever perished."

There was a moment's pause while both sat pondering, and the larks sang, and the bees hummed, and the tide crept nearer and nearer.

"Why is it do you think, sir," said Ascher at last, "that such things are allowed, such orgies of destruction as are always happening in the world?"

"God knows," said James, "since it is God who allows them. Some would tell you that they are the result of former happenings. The sins of the fathers being visited on the children. . . ."

"Yet they would not be right in every case," said Martin. "Look here, sir! I could make a catastrophe happen now. There's a colony of ants below this bush here, all as busy and happy as any Minoans ever were, all with their little plans and treasures laid up, no doubt. Yet with this piece of rock in my hand here, I, just for the fun of the thing, could smash them all to atoms!"

"Ascher, you are horrible," said Mr. Carruthers, "and you have interrupted me at the most important point of my story. If—as I think—as I am practically certain—my Vision is not a vision at all but a memory—I am determined if possible to establish a connection between my Greater Memory and my present faculty, in other words, to put my present faculty at the disposal of my Soul-Memory even as the automatic writer puts his hand and his power of writing at the disposal of the controlling spirit."

"I understand, sir, I understand," said Ascher, eagerly.

Mr. Carruthers regarded him triumphantly for a moment.

"So you see," he went on then, "why to-day I am an optimist. But come along," he added, rising stiffly, "the day is fading. Let us go from here while it is still warm and gay and fragrant, so that *this* memory, at least, may remain perfect, through whatever may come after."

"Your optimism is fading too, sir, it seems," said Ascher, as he began following his companion up the rugged slope to the path which runs along the top of the cliffs.

"You shall be David to my Saul," returned Mr. Carruthers. "I told them to have food ready, and a huge fire. After we have had supper, there will still be time before morning. Your train, I think you said, does not leave till about seven. I want the Ballades and the Nocturnes and my four special Sonatas, and then you may play whatever you like. . . . That is," he added, recollecting himself, "if you don't want to sleep—if you care to play to me?"

"Care to? I should think I did!" said Ascher. "There is no one in the world I care to play to so much as you, sir. Besides," he laughed, "your man with the lamp might give me the nightmare. I would rather not sleep to-night anyhow."

CHAPTER I

IN WHICH A HOUSE AND A HOUSEHOLDER COME FOR THE FIRST TIME FACE TO FACE, WITH THE RESULT THAT A COURT-MARTIAL, NOWHERE ELSE RECORDED, IS HELD

THE curious little episode of Inter-war History, the details of which are now to be written down for the first time, may be said to have begun—though who shall say when any tale concerning human beings really begins or ends?—on a grey afternoon of October, 1918, at the precise moment when Mrs. Abercrombie, returning from a committee meeting, first saw the notice of the serious shortage of coal posted up on a hoarding at a street corner of Rathness. It was a large and sensational notice with the word coal printed in lurid yellow upon a black ground, and below it, in startling white letters, was the information that as most of the supply for the winter had already been used to save the allied armies in the spring, the very strictest economy was now necessary.

"Well, this puts the lid on it," said Mrs. Abercrombie, for she was the friend and confidante of every niece and nephew she had, and to the wonder and scandal of her contemporaries often quite unconsciously made use of their expressions. As she spoke she came to a standstill on the edge of the pavement, a sturdy, rather stout, but still shapely middle-aged figure, with one of those handsome florid faces which after a certain age seem to grow no older. It was framed in thick bands of smooth, dark hair lightly touched with grey, and was always radiant with the genial interest in all her fellow-creatures which was one of her main characteristics. Her black garments had a certain pre-war dis-

tinction about them which had once been smartness, for their owner had had a weakness for chiffons. In the dusk or at a distance she still looked the woman of fashion that she had been in 1914. It was only at close range that one noticed how the four years of war had added historical interest to her attire, for patriotic and not pecuniary reasons. Mrs. Abercrombie was a woman of fortune, widow of Archibald Abercrombie, Esq., of the Villa Fiore, near Fiesole, and of Number Three Canmore Place, Rathness, well-known about twenty years ago in artistic circles as one of the most gifted and charming connoisseurs and dilettantes of his day.

As befitted the wife of such a man, Emmeline Abercrombie, at the time of her marriage, though not strictly beautiful, had been extremely fascinating, combining in her personality the ease and grace of manner which came to her with a dash of good French blood, and the quick temper and high courage of forebears belonging to one of the most notable and ancient of the Highland clans. Her husband always said, however, that her warm heart, her impulsiveness, and her quick responsive sympathy with all and sundry that crossed her path were neither French nor Scottish, but a legacy from some Irish ancestor so remote or so disreputable as to have found no recognition in the family archives, and the constant dilemmas in which this landed her were a source of entertainment to him up to the close of his too short life.

"You are completely wasted you know, Em, in your rôle as my wife," he would say to her when she was enlarging to him upon some new enthusiasm for which she was ready at the moment to go to any lengths. "You should have been a leader of forlorn hopes, or an Arctic explorer, or an Early Christian martyr."

It must always, for his sake, be regretted that it was not given to him to see his Em confronted with the opportunities of the war. At the time of the murder of the Archduke at Sarajevo he had been more than twenty years in his grave, and the wife whom he had left a dark vivid little woman in

her early thirties, was in her fifty-fifth year and somewhat faded and life-worn. The warm heart in her was still the same, however, except that, having passed in the intervening years through many fires of experience, it was more eager and interested than it had ever been. Withal it had remained young, as only those hearts do which have been given in their youth to their first loves.

"It's a pleasure to me to have them," she would say to fathers and mothers who thanked her for her kindness to their sons and daughters; "they remind me so much of myself when I was young and of my poor boy who is dead and gone."

As was to be expected, the war plunged her into a maelstrom of sympathies and activities. Rathness on the whole was a hard-working little place in those days, but no one in Rathness worked harder than Mrs. Abercrombie. Early and late she was attending committee meetings, public meetings, and work-parties of all kinds. The old house, at 3 Canmore Place, never saw her except when she rushed in, between appointments, to snatch a meal, or entertain soldiers and their relations, or hold sub-committee meetings there. It did not seem to miss its mistress, however. Rather did a serene contentment with its deserted lot seem to settle down upon it. Elizabeth and Martha and Catherine, the three maids, attended to its wants as though nothing outside it were happening. There were no parties now to upset its calm or disarrange its furniture. It might have been the ancient days returned when the light-hearted Archibald's father—old Archibald—passed his last monotonous days there, and when the house itself seemed to be of far more consequence than its half comatose and insignificant owner.

When Martha felt it to be her duty to go and work in a munition-factory the house can hardly have known the difference. Certainly no one else did, for Elizabeth and Catherine shared Martha's duties between them. Even when Catherine left to be a cook at a hospital and some of the rooms had to be draped in dust-sheets and shut up, the

change was to outsiders still imperceptible. The steps up to the door were as white as ever, the brasses as glittering, the windows as crystal-clear as ever they had been in Catherine's time. Elizabeth prided herself upon not allowing the reduced woman-power of the establishment to become noticeable, and so well did she achieve this purpose that the house only seemed, in Catherine's absence, to have become a degree more peaceful and more nearly perfect.

Therefore, when, standing on the edge of the pavement considering the coal-shortage notice, Mrs. Abercrombie had remarked that it put the lid on it, she spoke with reference rather to the past than to the future, and meant that the necessity for economy in fuel had brought a certain dubiety in her mind to a conclusion as to the course she ought to pursue with regard to Elizabeth.

Since the last urgent appeal for women-workers, Elizabeth, the silent-footed, deft-handed servant of the house, and incidentally of its mistress, had been a burden to Mrs. Abercrombie's conscience. What right had she in war-time —a lone woman still of working age and hardly ever in the house—to the ministrations of such a perfect servant? Surely a charwoman in emergencies should suffice her. She had all but decided to announce this to Elizabeth, and now this shortage notice swept away any last hesitations she might have had upon the subject. The kitchen fire-place at 3 Canmore Place was of ancient build, and a bottomless pit for fuel. Yet Elizabeth without her kitchen fire was as inconceivable as a priestess without her altar. When her mistress had suggested her using only the little open fire-place in the servants' hall and not lighting the kitchen fire at all, Elizabeth had only smiled—she had a certain way of smiling—and had asked politely how about the hot water then? The fire in the servants' hall would not heat the hot water. When Mrs. Abercrombie had hesitated in her reply, having as a matter of fact never thought of the hot water, Elizabeth had pressed her advantage by saying, how about the pipes getting frozen and perhaps bursting? Clearly

Elizabeth, perfect as she was, seemed to be lamentably unadaptable. The war, to her, was something quite outside her sphere, so long, at least, as she remained in her kitchen. But she had said the day before that Martha had written her asking her to join her. Large wages were to be had at the munition-works. Elizabeth had implied that in remaining faithful to 3 Canmore Place she was sacrificing a fortune. Why not go then? her mistress had urged, feeling that to continue to allow herself to be served under these conditions was to be a robber not only of her country but of Elizabeth. Elizabeth, however, had merely smiled once more, and opined that, all things considered, she was better where she was, and that so long as she attended to the house and set her mistress entirely free to do war-work surely she was doing her bit. Thus Mrs. Abercrombie's conscience had been appeased for that time. This urgent notice of the coal-shortage, however, was another matter. Before, it had been a mere vague rumour in the air. Now it was put plainly before her in black and white and lurid yellow. Smile or no smile, hot water or no hot water, burst pipes or no burst pipes Elizabeth *must* use the economical fire-place—or better still—Mrs. Abercrombie here became recklessly patriotic—Elizabeth *must go!* One fire in a house for one woman was surely all that was necessary. Let the drawing-room fire be that fire and let all others be extinguished.

Mrs. Abercrombie here set off homewards with a free step, and that very night all was over with Elizabeth. It had been agreed that she was to report herself next afternoon at the recruiting-office. No longer would Mrs. Abercrombie consent to stand between her and her country's need of her, no longer presume to detain her at fifty pounds a year when her country's untold gold awaited her. There was no mention of coal between them, but this Elizabethan era, like its famous predecessor, closed in a glorious blaze. That night the kitchen range roared like a fiery furnace, and Mrs. Ab-

ercrombie had a scalding bath, wondering all the time when she would have another like it.

Next day Elizabeth, after devoting the morning and the earlier part of the day to a quite unnecessary orgie of polishing and cleaning, left the house shining and gleaming behind her and went to the recruiting-office. She returned in time to make tea, and informed her mistress, who also, for once, had returned in time for it, that she had been ordered to report herself again as soon as her uniform was ready, and that, as she believed she would be needed soon, she wished to leave immediately in order to see something of her relations first.

Mrs. Abercrombie cordially assented to this. She knew those relations. They lived in Rathness and were called Speed, though their name should have been legion. If Elizabeth did not go to see them at this crisis in her career, they would undoubtedly come to see Elizabeth. Already one of them it seemed—the eldest niece—Devina Speed—was waiting in the kitchen to see Mrs. Abercrombie.

"She's just fifteen but she's a good worker and would take my place while I was away," said her aunt.

But Mrs. Abercrombie also knew Devina, and rather well too. She was a member—a leading member—in fact the flower and pride of the junior section of the girls' club where Mrs. Abercrombie had been wont to speak, with the fire and eloquence natural to her, upon domestic subjects. Her quick imagination pictured Devina within the four walls of her house, confronting her with silent criticism, challenging her to practise what she had preached, haunting her with her unwelcome presence, for, though she sincerely admired her, she had never liked Devina.

"Thank you very much, Elizabeth," she said. "It was kind of you to suggest it, but I have decided to do my bit too, and to save coal, and manage the house myself."

Elizabeth was so startled that she did not even smile.

"Oh, M'm," she exclaimed, "surely you're never goin' to attemp' *that!*"

But if she had thought for half a day she could not have chosen a speech more inciting to Mrs. Abercrombie at that moment. She had unconsciously, too, accented the last word, which seemed to imply that other feats had been attempted by her mistress unsuccessfully.

"Not only shall I attempt it, Elizabeth," said Mrs. Abercrombie, "but I shall accomplish it."

"Oh, but M'm," remonstrated Elizabeth again, "you with all your outside work—but maybe you will be givin' up the outside work?"

"Not one jot nor tittle of it," said Mrs. Abercrombie, for her blood was up.

Elizabeth stared in silent amazement.

"At the present day, Elizabeth," continued Mrs. Abercrombie, "housekeeping cannot be carried on in the same manner as in pre-war times. I, for instance, have no intention of doing everything as you have been accustomed to do it."

Here Elizabeth must have begun to recover, for the ghost of her smile reappeared upon her dazed countenance.

"With so many much more important things to do outside," Mrs. Abercrombie went on, "I shall simply select the essentials, and let the rest—*rip*. With my gas-cooker and my letter-box I shall be perfectly comfortable. And even if I were not—think of what infinitely worse discomfort thousands of people are at this moment undergoing."

. . . . . .

That evening Elizabeth, leaving enough food cooked for two days' meals, took her departure. When she had really gone, accompanied by those members of the Speed family who had arrived to escort her, Mrs. Abercrombie, having locked the back door, took occasion, for there was no committee meeting just then, and she had eschewed the Guild for that afternoon, to look over the less familiar part of her domain.

A curious feeling that she was making the acquaintance of her house for the first time came upon her as she wan-

dered, candle in hand, through the passages of the lower regions peering into cupboards she had half forgotten, noting for the first time details of furniture and architecture.

"It was like discovering new traits of character in an old friend," she said afterwards. "It was eerie, uncanny, and the scullery was worst of all. There were so many things there that I had never seen before, much less knew how to use, all winking and blinking at me—ugh, it was beastly!"

Upstairs, however, there was the drawing-room and the fire, and never had a fire looked so beautiful to Mrs. Abercrombie. As she dined with her little round table drawn up to the genial warmth, she felt happy again—nay, more than happy—elated.

The sense of depression, however, returned slightly the next morning when she found her dinner-dishes as she had left them the night before, and a first qualm of realisation of the inertness of Things came upon her with a chill as of foreboding.

There was no time for much of it, however, for she was already late for the Guild, having sat too long in the companionship of the fire the night before, and consequently wakened late.

A rapid survey showed her that nothing was aggressively in need of dusting. The hand of Elizabeth, though vanished, was still in evidence in gleams and glitters all over the house. It was like a hall of mirrors.

Mrs. Abercrombie saw herself reflected on every hand.

"Poor Elizabeth," she said to herself as she noted this too for the first time, "and to think that I should take it all as a matter of course that she should spend her life for years doing it! No wonder she wanted a change not only from the house but from my obtuseness!"

Mrs. Abercrombie had decided that she would not dust every day. As she tied on her hat with a veil, for the morning was stormy, she harangued her reflection in her mirror upon the subject.

"Housekeeping," she said, "will be difficult or easy just as you choose to make it. A large part of the time generally required may be saved by a little forethought. If things are not disarranged they will need no rearranging. If polished surfaces are carefully avoided, they will not need repolishing. Thus the best remedy for waste of time will be to come in contact with as few things as possible."

The one exception to these regulations was the fire. This, however, she had already tackled and laid ready for the evening. Long practice in fire-making at picnics in her youth—for Archibald had loved picnics—gave her in this facility and dexterity, and she went forth from it to her outside work with a comfortable sense of power and capability.

In this mood criticism only strengthened her determination.

"Now why," said her next neighbour at the Guild that morning, an old acquaintance, a Miss Carruthers, "why not shut up the house and go into lodgings? You would then be saving still more coal."

"But I might be occupying the place of one who had no other house," replied Mrs. Abercrombie, "or who would not be inclined to be so economical in it."

She lunched on sandwiches in the ante-room of the Guild, made one hundred and fifty-seven ball-swabs in the afternoon, and had tea there before, slightly tired, she again turned her thoughts homewards. Then for the first time she found herself reluctant to follow them, and started off abruptly to stop herself becoming afraid to face the dreariness awaiting her.

The fire, however, soon revived her, together with the inward glow of satisfaction she experienced when, foraging for dinner, she peeped into the dim kitchen and saw the rapacious maw of the old range black and empty. After she had finished her meal she sat on dreaming in the firelight, too lazy to close the curtains and light the gas. The whole room was full of ruddy light. Over the piano hung

the portrait of her husband, done by a young artist who would have been famous had he lived. The glow touching it made it seem to smile as the original had smiled so often in the long ago at her and her vagaries. She lay back in her low chair looking at it and smiling too at the thought of how her Archie would have been amused by this new departure.

His Em her own cook-housekeeper! How he would have laughed! She remembered how he had wondered often how she would get on without him to take care of her and guard her from what he had called her ententes with the irrelevant; and how they two had laughed heartily together, even when he was on his death-bed, at a caricature—which now hung framed over her mirror—that he had made of her as his relict.

She sat thus dreaming until the glow faded and the fire died down. Then she went to bed. . . .

No dreams awaited her in the morning, however—only dishes.

Another chill wave of the realisation of the stillness of still life swept over her at the sight of them. Her natural energy, however, rose to the occasion. She boiled a kettle-ful of water, washed them all up, and had sat down to breakfast before she remembered that she should have waited to include the things she was then using.

"You will have to concentrate," she announced to herself, "if you are to have time for anything but washing up."

She began by boiling an egg in the tea-kettle, and, this accomplished, she went to search for the milk. She found it on the doorstep. She also found that owing to the storm and rain of the night before the exterior of the house had become strangely altered. The area, which Elizabeth had left white and spotless, was carpeted and heaped in places with wet and withered leaves. The steps were drifted with them, and so was the door-mat. As for the brasses——

Their owner stood contemplating them, and, wishing that she had paid more attention the day before, when Elizabeth

had shown her where the cleaning things were, and she had just decided that, as the storm was evidently not yet over, she had better leave them altogether to another time, when interference from an unexpected quarter suddenly made her change her mind.

"Please, M'm," said a suave voice at her elbow, "Elizabeth said to come and see if ye was needin' any help."

She turned and beheld, standing among the sodden leaves on the pavement, a trim damsel with a pink tam-o'-shanter and long pig-tails who was steadily regarding her.

"Thank you, Devina," said Mrs. Abercrombie at once, as she thought of those eyes viewing various disorders in the interior. "It was very kind of Elizabeth to tell you to come, but it was quite unnecessary. When I need you I shall let you know."

"Very good, M'm," said Devina, and withdrew politely, but only to the other side of the square, whence she was able to observe with great satisfaction the difficulties Mrs. Abercrombie subsequently encountered. Mrs. Abercrombie saw her too, and it did not improve her temper, as her assistants at the canteen that day soon became aware.

"What's come to Mrs. Abercrombie?" said one to another. . . .

That night, instead of concentrating her dinner-things as she had intended, she not only doubled but re-doubled them.

"I had no idea that the Hatter was a pathetic figure," she said to herself as, too dead beat to think of washing up anything, she took more dishes from the cupboard. "I always thought he was merely comic. But Things—Tea-Things—had literally become too much for him. I shall never laugh at his party any more."

Five days passed, and, by the end of them, the occasional fits of realisation had become one continuous state of mind. In the background of her consciousness, amid all the outside work the house stood, ever a waiting reproach. When she entered it in the evenings it seemed to close in upon her with all its needs, its little neglected details. An awesome

sense of deterioration, even of disintegration seemed to pervade it everywhere. It was as though Elizabeth had been the soul of it, and with her gone, it was decomposing.

Always, however, when the fire burned up, strong reaction would set in and Mrs. Abercrombie would become mistress of it again. Settling herself comfortably in her low chair with her feet on the fender she would confront it boldly.

"It all depends," she would say to it, "upon the standpoint I take up. From a pre-war standpoint I admit that you are in a regrettable state, but, comparing you with some of the châteaux in France and Belgium at this moment, you are nothing of the sort."

In this mood she again dismissed Devina Speed, who called once more to ask her if she did not want her to come and wash. She thanked her and said she would send everything to the laundry in order to be as communal as possible. She talked to Devina quite a long time about being communal, and developed the idea that afternoon at a committee meeting, having a rather sharp encounter with the Chair for starting the question—in the midst of a discussion about a Red Cross concert—of a Communal Kitchen for the entire population of Rathness.

Returning late that night, she found in her letter-box field-postcards from two of her favourite nephews saying that their leaves were due, and that they hoped one day soon to come and take her by surprise, together. This message altered the whole aspect of things in a moment. The house on a sudden became not a house merely but the place where she was presently to receive her two dear darlings.

Next day, having a presentiment that they would appear within twenty-four hours, she threw herself headlong into preparations. Guild, canteen, everything else, went by the board. She spent the whole day making up beds, sweeping, dusting, scrubbing, and telephoning for provisions. Callers rang the front-door bell and received no response. Bewildered message-boys were ordered from above to deposit

their parcels on the window-sills. Yet, had Devina called to offer her services again that day, she would have received the same answer.

"For now, more than ever, I must save the coal," she said to herself, "that I may have a good blaze all the time the dear boys are here."

Word was sent to Devina by a message-boy, however, that at any moment she might be required, with the result that when she was not haunting Canmore Place she was seated in the shop whose telephone was to summon her.

No message came, however. Mrs. Abercrombie's presentiment notwithstanding, twenty-four hours passed, forty-eight hours, and still there was no sign. On the morning of the third day a telegram arrived at Canmore Place. "Leave indefinitely postponed," and, looking round the drawing-room after reading it, Mrs. Abercrombie had the worst fit of realisation she had ever had. For again the indescribable deterioration of everything had set in. All her work had apparently gone for nothing. A haze of neglect lay over everything just as though she had never made an effort. The whole house seemed to her at that moment to be personified in a bulgy old Indian image seated opposite, his gorgeous garments dim with dust, even his fat smile obscured.

"But if you think that I am going to dust you again now," she said rising, "you are jolly well mistaken."

And she went off to the Guild and did ninety-six ball-swabs and three pneumonia jackets before evening. . . .

Two days after that she made a speech, still remembered in Rathness, at a meeting to promote the British Empire Union for the defence of the country against aliens, and was made president of the Rathness Branch. She had not meant even to go to the meeting, but had gone with a friend, and when there had, as usual, been moved to voluble self-expression. Afterwards, on thinking it over, she believed that the house had made her do it—the house with Elizabeth and the Germans and the Kaiser and the Devil

at the back of it. Anyhow, the speech was a very violent speech. One woman in the audience even got up and said she wondered that anyone calling herself a Christian could say such things, upon which Mrs. Abercrombie reminded her of the anathemas of Christ Himself against the Scribes and Pharisees, and was thereafter uninterrupted.

Nevertheless that evening, seated again by the fire, with Archie's portrait in the flickering light watching her, she felt unhappy about it, and wondered what he would have said. Memories came to her of Frankfort and the long ago, and the Palmengarten with its lights and music where they had first met, and the Museums concert where they had sat hand in hand listening to the Beethoven Number One.

. . . . . .

Many stories have been written about haunted houses, but has there ever been one about a person who was house-haunted?

The house soon began to pursue Mrs. Abercrombie wheresoever she went. It changed her from a genial soul into a being with whom it was impossible to get on.

Informal meetings were held sub rosa in corners of drawing-rooms and work-rooms to discuss what was to be done about it. But as is usual in such cases nothing was done, and Mrs. Abercrombie's tongue, during the ten days or so that followed, may be said to have run amok in Rathness. She quarrelled with everyone. She even quarrelled with her own hobbies. She reached a climax at a meeting of the Women Citizens, when they were discussing reconstruction after the war, and the question was asked whether anything were likely to be done in the town to provide more commodious homes for workpeople.

"God forbid!" said Mrs. Abercrombie. "The fewer rooms to keep they have the better."

Yet a hundred times before in Rathness she had passionately advocated more spacious housing.

"In my opinion," said the secretary, a Miss Mylde, "poor

Mrs. Abercrombie is suffering from some form of war-dementia."

This brief speech upon housing, however, was the last she was to deliver at that time, for the next day was The Day—Der Tag, as the Kaiser would have called it.

It began abominably. It was drizzling rain, and when, in melancholy mood, Mrs. Abercrombie was looking out of the window for a moment, the porridge singed. This brought on a severe fit of realisation before breakfast, a time when it was most difficult to combat. The odour of burnt meal, together with the feeling of incompetence which it suggested, had an enraging effect, and the house deliberately aggravated it. Everywhere it seemed to obtrude its requirements as a beggar, asking alms, draws attention to his sores. On one side were unwashed dishes, on the other were unscraped pots. Behind these things visible were others invisible—vistas of unswept passages, saharas of unswitched carpets. Behind these again, and more rousing than all, were powers of darkness in the form of old traditions, along with a sense of their futility in war-time and wrath at the weakness that could feel discomfort at the thought of them. The tout ensemble produced a kind of frenzy in Mrs. Abercrombie. She spoke aloud. She addressed the house.

"You old Juggernaut!" she said. "You old effete fossil of an outworn civilisation, you shall not hinder me for one instant! I am going off now to do really necessary things, and you need not expect a single stroke of work from me to-day. Deteriorate if you like—disintegrate—rot—I don't care a damn what you do!"

Then, banging the door behind her, she went out.

When she reached the Guild the first person she met was Miss Mylde.

"How clever of you to be so early!" she exclaimed. "And your maid away, too! How do you manage?"

"Oh, these things can always be managed," she replied,

but in such a tone that no more questions were asked of her.

"Take care," she had almost added, for the desire to dig her needle into her questioner had come suddenly and violently upon her.

The morning passed. She lunched with a Mrs. Jardine, who generally had everything as charming as she was herself. That day, however, she had to have the children there because the nurse had left, and, as her guest said afterwards, there was neither comfort nor coherence.

She need not have gone to the canteen after that, but the thought of returning to the house had become a nightmare to her. She seemed to see it looming over her all afternoon —a dignified and insulted Presence. At last, however, about ten o'clock, there was no longer any excuse for delay.

"I am sure you will be glad to get home, Mrs. Abercrombie," said the caretaker, as she helped her with her raincoat. "You look fit to drop."

This, of course, had the effect of making her feel worse than she had ever felt yet. She had, without knowing it, looked fit to drop all day. Now, however, for the first time, she felt it. She could hardly drag herself along the streets. It was very dark and she had sometimes to feel her way. Twice she stumbled and nearly fell. Before she came to the corner where she had to turn into Canmore Place it had begun to rain steadily, and she was feeling, as she afterwards said, like nothing on earth.

She was afraid to look at the house. A kind of terror was upon her at the thought of going into it again alone and seeing everything ranged up against her. That Something Vital, however, which stands outside and looks on, reminded her that this was only tiredness, and that she would feel better later. Thus reassured she thrust her latch-key into the lock, turned it, opened the door, and then stopped short as though transfixed.

The house was no longer as she had left it. It was no longer empty. Light was pouring out of the open door of

the drawing-room into the inner hall. Voices—voices of men, and footsteps of people in heavy boots seemed to be here, there, and everywhere; and from the basement, which she had left cold and silent as any vault, came a fizzing sound and a strong smell of fish frying.

It was this last, Mrs. Abercrombie afterwards said, that was the pink limit and fairly floored her. All she remembered, after sniffing it, was snatching wildly at the umbrella-stand, which fell immediately, crashing forwards. . . .

When she came to herself—for she had actually fainted for the first time in all her life—she was established on the drawing-room sofa, exquisitely at ease and deliciously tucked up, with two familiar faces bending over her.

She could not believe her eyes.

"Archie . . . Reggie!" she gasped.

Then—"How did you get in?" she added, which showed, as she said afterwards, how very rattled she was.

That she, who for weeks and months had been looking forward to this home-coming, should have greeted them with such a question!

But they seemed to think it the most natural in the world.

"By the back door, my dear," said Reggie. "You had forgotten to shut it, and we found a delightful child in the area called Devina Speed."

"Devina Speed!" exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie.

"Yes, and she offered to do messages, so we sent her here, there, and everywhere, and now behold the result."

A great fire was roaring up the chimney, and the round table was drawn up to it, laden with food. Platefuls of all kinds of things, cups and saucers were on it, and on other tables near, and on the piano. Coffee was boiling, bread was toasting.

"But you would rather go to bed now, wouldn't you?" said Reggie. "We've sent for the doctor, but he's away, and perhaps may not be back to-night."

Of course she would not hear of going to bed. She assured them she had never felt better in her life. After they had had supper she persuaded them to let her come and sit at the fire beside them. Presently, therefore, feeling as though she were in a happy dream, she found herself in her low chair once more, with her two dear darlings, the firelight setting their faces aglow, seated on the rug at her feet.

For a little time no one spoke. Mrs. Abercrombie's heart for once was too full for words. Pictures rose before her of the two as they had looked when they had sat there before as little lads, one from India, one from South America, as merry schoolboys, as eager students, and now—from what had they come back to her? On Reggie's breast, in the firelight, she could see the ribbon of the D.S.O.

Archie, her best beloved, in face and form so like the Archie who was gone, looked fully ten years older than when she had last seen him. There was no ribbon on his breast, but this, in her eyes, only made him the more dear; just as the groping appreciation of beautiful things, which was all that had come down to him of the gifts of his brilliant uncle, had always infused her love for him with special tenderness. It was a moment of moments. She had never felt as she did then.

But all at once Archie spoke.

"Now, Reggie," he said.

"All right," said Reggie, and laughed. Then, leaning forward, he knocked the ashes off the end of his cigarette.

"Aunt Em," he went on, "we are going to court-martial you. You are accused, my dear, of gross neglect of duty."

"Neglect of duty? *Me?*" exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie.

They both laughed aloud.

"Yes," Reggie went on. "Is it not the duty of an aunt whose nephews are sacrificing everything to keep her comfortable—to *keep* comfortable, or at least not to work herself to death?"

"Now don't say a word," said Archie, as the accused was about to speak. "We know everything already. We have

interviewed Devina Speed. And we now sentence you to at least three months total cessation from hard labour."

"Impossible, my dears," cried Mrs. Abercrombie. "That Devina Speed knows nothing. She is a prying, interfering——"

"She is, on the contrary," said Archie, "a very estimable young woman, left by Elizabeth on observation duty, which she has conscientiously performed."

"All the same she is irrelevant," Reggie broke in. "We are wandering from the point, which is, that it is settled that you, Aunt Em, go off somewhere as soon as we can arrange it, and remain there hors de combat for as long as we please."

"But, my beloveds, I can't," cried Mrs. Abercrombie. "You have no idea——"

"Yes, we have," said Reggie. "We know you are on half a hundred committees and member of another half hundred societies, but surely our peace of mind is more to you than all these things?"

"My dear, you know that," she said, "but——"

"We are going back in a few days," Archie went on, his eyes shining in the firelight, "to—to the Great Advance. Surely you will do this little thing for us, won't you—if we ask you?"

She had given in already, of course. Even before the war she had never been able to refuse either of her Archie's nephews anything, and since the war began—and well they knew it—she would willingly have died for them. Yet she made one last effort.

"*Must* you ask me to do this?" she said.

Even as she spoke, however, she was realising how delightful it would be to be out of everything.

"Yes, we must," said Reggie. "What's the use of us fighting away to guard our aunt from the Boches while behind our backs she is deliberately committing suicide?"

"And if you care a button for us——" added Archie.

That quite settled it.

Two hours afterwards Mrs. Abercrombie was in bed, wide awake, but extraordinarily, strangely happy. She had promised not to plan anything, but to let everything be planned for her, and she had been sitting basking in the firelight and her boys' affection, pretending to listen to them discussing where she was to go, but really just watching them.

It seemed to her as though a great load had been removed from her spirit, and it worried her not a whit that the whole Speed family had been commandeered to come and tackle everything in the morning, for, with her own relief, her goodwill to the house had returned.

"Well, old Juggernaut," she said to it. "Now you will be attended to. All the same," she added after a moment, "it was not *you* who conquered me, remember!"

"No," the house seemed to reply in its own voiceless manner. "But—recollect—neither did you conquer *me!* It has been a drawn game between us."

CHAPTER II

IN WHICH AN ACCOUNT IS GIVEN OF SOME THINGS THAT HAPPENED IN RATHNESS, ONE DARK NIGHT IN THE OCTOBER OF NINETEEN HUNDRED AND EIGHTEEN

BUT it was one thing for Mrs. Abercrombie to accede to her nephews' request, and quite another for her to become, as she had promised, hors de combat. What with committee and sub-committee meetings, called in consequence of her announcement that she was going away for an indefinite time, it took her, even with the assistance of the Speed family (to whom the house, in the hours of daylight at least, was now given up), over a fortnight to attain to leisure. Indeed, as she said, if she had not promised those dear boys, she would never have been able to get through with what she had to go through.

As may be supposed, the defection of such a prominent worker and organiser at the beginning of the winter did not pass without comment.

"Didn't I say so?" said Miss Mylde. "You remember what I said after she made that outrageous speech about the housing question."

"If she had tried she couldn't have chosen a more inconvenient time," said Mrs. Grimshaw of the canteen. "I'm sure I can't understand people always wanting to have rests. *I* never need a rest."

"No, it's only the people you are always with, who do," said one of her assistants sotto voce as she margarined scones at a side-table. . . .

"But in such an out-of-the-way place as you want to find, dear," said pretty little Mrs. Jardine, who had remained

behind, after the last meeting of all, to talk over the matter, "won't you be very lonely?"

"I sincerely hope so, dear Elise," said Mrs. Abercrombie.

She had not found this Nirvana yet, however. All efforts so far had proved futile. The court-martial had laid down so many conditions, and fenced her destination about with so many stipulations. It had been impossible to have it all fixed up, before they had to leave again for France. They had, however, left it to her honour, and drawn up a list of regulations, which she had had to sign with her full name—Emmeline D'Orsay Abercrombie. These were as follows:—

"I hereby promise:—

"1. That the place of residence, which I shall choose, shall not be in the neighbourhood of any war-working community.

"2. That my landlady shall be a housekeeper of the first rank, and that I shall leave to her all questions concerning the commissariat, and especially the coal ration.

"3. That I shall confine my war-activities to knitting, letter-writing, and parcel-sending.

"4. That upon no consideration whatever shall I take part in any organising.

"5. That I shall lose no unnecessary time in leaving Rathness for—whatever the name of the place is.

"6. That upon no consideration shall I return to Rathness, unless in great emergency, under three months, without due notice and the consent of either—

"Captain Reginald Abercrombie,
"Black Watch,
"B.E.F., France,

"Or—

"Lieutenant Archibald Abercrombie,
"Seaforth Highlanders,
"B.E.F., France,

"given and obtained."

Here followed her own signature.

The last meeting of all had been held at 3 Canmore Place. After Mrs. Jardine had left, Mrs. Abercrombie went over to her desk and took out a little old blotting-book, in which were the above regulations and three letters. The regulations she already knew by heart. She took up the letters, however, and looked them over. They were all answers to questions about lodgings, all from out-of-the-way places, which, according to the writers, were just the very thing she wanted.

"But how am I to know that they are, till I get there?" she said to herself.

Then the brilliant idea came to her that she would try them all in turn, and with that feeling of satisfaction which ensues upon any conclusion arrived at, whatever it may be, she was inditing notes to all three landladies, when the front-door bell rang.

Glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece she saw that it was already past the hour at which the Speed family retired to their own place, and realised that, if the door was to be answered, it must be by herself.

She went out into the hall therefore. Deep dusk had already fallen, but Devina, with her usual forethought, had left a peep of gas just sufficient to see the door by. It was not enough, however, to let her see who stood without, and she did not recognise her visitor until a familiar voice said:

"May I come in, Mrs. Abercrombie?"

"Clara Carruthers?" she exclaimed, as cordially as she could, for Miss Carruthers was one of her oldest acquaintances, and though slightly boring, one of the best workers in Rathness.

She did not wait for a more definite invitation. She came in at once.

"I am so sorry to trouble you," she said, "when you must be so busy, but I was so anxious to speak to you. I have just received a letter by the evening post which

has upset me very much, and I wondered if you would help me in the matter."

"Certainly, my dear, come in," said Mrs. Abercrombie, beginning at once to feel more interested; and, leading her into the drawing-room, she drew forward a chair for her.

Miss Carruthers sat down, a thin figure, with pinched, rather vague features, surmounted by a brown cloth toque, which sprouted on both sides into tall spikes like rabbit's ears. She had a habit of clutching her elbows with her hands while she was speaking, as though she were endeavouring to see how narrow she could make herself.

"It's about my brother," she began, as Mrs. Abercrombie poked up the fire. "I received this letter about him, when I came home from the meeting, which is most disquieting—most disquieting."

She was fumbling in her pockets as she spoke, and at the second "disquieting" she produced the letter.

"Your brother?" said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Do you mean James? And is he not here now? I thought that you were keeping his house, and that he was doing tutoring?"

As she spoke she remembered the last time she had seen James, and how, though he had known her from his childhood, he had cut her dead at two yards, being, she supposed, not only short-sighted, but engaged upon some abstruse problem.

"I did come, after the war began, to keep house for him," said Miss Carruthers. "Both his servants had left suddenly because of some experiments he was doing. I don't know what they were, but they declared the house was haunted. I have been here since then. But James has now given up tutoring, for last August he received a legacy, which enabled him to devote himself to what he calls his Investigation. I have said nothing to anybody about this legacy before, for, of course, in my opinion, it should have been given to the war, but he says—he really is quite impossible at times, Mrs. Abercrombie—that as the war began all right without his assistance, he has no doubt it will also end all

right without it, and that he is more concerned, anyway, about ending his Investigation."

"Oh, indeed?" said Mrs. Abercrombie. "I thought you were going to say he had joined up."

"Oh, no," said Miss Carruthers, distressed.

"He is here, then, still?" said Mrs. Abercrombie.

"No, he's not here either," said Miss Carruthers, nervously opening and shutting the letter on her lap. "He is now at a place called Wood End, where he says he means to spend the winter."

"Wood End?" said Mrs. Abercrombie. "I have never heard of it."

"Nor had I," said Miss Carruthers, "until this last summer. It should have been called World's End in my opinion. But it is situated, it seems, between two woods, somewhere near the middle of Scotland. Professor Swanwick told him about it. He had been there fishing once or twice, and had had rooms at a house called the Dovecote, belonging to a woman called Mrs. Binnie, who had made him very comfortable. Now we all know that anyone who can make Professor Swanwick comfortable must know something about housekeeping, so when James announced to me quite suddenly one day that he had taken rooms at Mrs. Binnie's, and was going there to get peace to finish his Investigation, I was glad things were no worse. James does do such extraordinary things sometimes. How people that knew him sent so many pupils to him I never could imagine! It must have been because of his power of attracting young men. They certainly seem all to have been devoted to him. But you see though he really did give them tastes for things, I suppose, he never gave them regular lessons. The last pupil he had before I came, I was told—Mr. ——, I forget his name—spent all his time fishing and playing the piano and helping James with his experiments."

Here Miss Carruthers paused in a kind of despairing

breathlessness to tuck a strand of hair, which had come loose, under her toque.

"But to get back to Wood End," she went on when this was accomplished, "I thought I would just come straight to you with this letter."

"I am glad you did," said Mrs. Abercrombie heartily, her interest now thoroughly aroused. "And if I can do anything——"

"Yes, I knew you would," said Miss Carruthers, handing over the letter, and while she clutched her elbows once more, Mrs. Abercrombie stuck on her eye-glasses and read it.

"The Dove-cote, South,
"Wood End,
"*October*, 1918.

"Dear Madam"—the letter ran—

"My aunt, Mrs. Binnie, has asked me to take up the pen to let you know about your brother, Mr. Carruthers, and to say that we think, both of us, that he would be better of some of his own people to come and look after him here. Not that we are complaining of Mr. Carruthers, far from it—for a pleasanter-spoken or a considerater gentleman we could not have in our house I am sure, but it's the way he goes on, madam, never remembering his meals or to put coals on his fire that makes us afraid to be responsible. We have spoken to him till we are tired, and he always says, yes, he will, but we find a tray that we had taken up for his breakfast often not touched at tea-time. Now at the beginning of winter, and this effluenza about that kills folk off in two days if their systems is run down, it's not right, madam, and so we hopes you will be able to arrange to come yourself, madam, or to send someone you can trust, for all we can do we are willing to do, but we cannot get him to take care of his self, madam. He says he will not have anyone staying in his end, but there's plenty room in our end, madam. Two nice bedrooms, looking south and west, and a sitting-room, on the same terms as Mr. Car-

ruthers's, madam. The sitting-room is particler nice, and we have a good piano, for I have a uncle away serving in the army now, who was in a music-shop, and he got it second-hand. The place is quiet, but there's nice walks in the woods, and two churches within two miles, one on each side. My aunt and me will attend you well, madam, for I am sure we will be proud to do anything for any friend of Mr. Carruthers, who as I say is the kindest of gentlemen, except to his own self.—Yours obediently,

"ELLEN BINNIE, Jun."

"Well?" said Mrs. Abercrombie encouragingly, as she took off her glasses when she had read the letter.

Miss Carruthers seized herself by the elbows again as for a supreme effort.

"Mrs. Abercrombie," she said, "you know I can't go now, at least I'm sure I oughtn't to. We are so short-handed, especially since—since *you* are going, Mrs. Abercrombie. And ever since I got the letter I have been wondering if you —James has such a regard for you—He would do what *you* told him. . . ."

"Would he?" laughed Mrs. Abercrombie. "He didn't when he was in pinafores. He disobeyed me flagrantly one afternoon that your poor mother left him to me to look after, and Archie told him that if he was so naughty he would never go to heaven, and he said he didn't care, and besides he had been there—because God made him, and God lived in heaven, he must have been there when he was getting made."

"How like James!" sighed Miss Carruthers. "He has no regard for anything!"

"And he is still a philosopher?" said Mrs. Abercrombie.

"No—he calls himself an Investigator," said Miss Carruthers. "He says he is the possessor of unusual powers that may be of more value to the world than any amount of learning. Though his grandfather and father before him were both professors he has no degree—he won't even try

to take one. Oh, if he would only be a plain philosopher or psychologist or anything like any other person it would be so delightful!"

"My dear, I feel sure he will be delightful as he is," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "I quite look forward to renewing my acquaintance with him."

"Oh, Mrs. Abercrombie," exclaimed Miss Carruthers, releasing her elbows and clasping her bony hands together. "Does that mean that you really will go to Wood End?"

"My dear," said Mrs. Abercrombie, "if you like I will go to-morrow."

"Oh!" exclaimed Miss Carruthers again, starting up.

"I *will!*" said Mrs. Abercrombie enthusiastically, rising also; "my things are nearly all packed, and the Speeds can attend to the other arrangements. James shall not miss one more meal than is necessary on my account, and as he has nothing to do with the war, he cannot come under the heading of war-work. The Dove-cote, too, what a delightful name! with peace in both syllables and a piano in the sitting-room, and a Mrs. Binnie, whom Professor Swanwick recommends—Hurry, my dear—hurry, and send a wire before the office closes!"

. . . . . .

Miss Carruthers lost no time in following Mrs. Abercrombie's instructions. In five minutes she had vanished like an elderly Ariel, toque, rabbit-ears and all into the outer darkness. It was indeed dark that night in Rathness. Gloom enveloped it everywhere like a heavy, warm pall. It was so still that the withered leaves falling to the ground lay motionless where they fell. Beyond the faint glimmer of the few street lamps—for the coal-shortage had darkened the little town more than the air-raids had done—nothing at all was to be seen. At the end of one of the streets an invisible group of men, soldiers or sailors—she could not tell which—were jollifying together in the darkness.

"Ye'll tak' the high road," they sang lustily, "an' I'll tak' the low road——"

Miss Carruthers, hurrying on, slipped through their midst without their even being aware that she had passed.

. . . . . .

There was darkness, too, in the fields beyond the town, and on the low cliffs, where only the lapping of the sea could be heard as it crept up softly once more among the boulders. Some one was creeping up to the cliff-foot also just at the moment when Miss Carruthers left Mrs. Abercrombie's, some one stumbling every moment, slipping among the sea-weed, now catching at it to keep himself from falling, now wading through it knee-deep.

He had no light, only the deeper shadow of the cliffs against the gloomy sky to guide him. Yet, without pausing, he struggled desperately on till, all but breathless, he reached the cliff-foot.

By good luck he had happened upon one of those steep but comparatively easy slopes of grass which break here and there into the ramparts of the rocks, and, waiting only for a moment to recover breath, he moved on again doggedly, as he could, until he had reached the top. Even there he did not linger, but, feeling about in the darkness as one who knows what he seeks for, and knows, too, that it is near at hand, he found the narrow track that runs winding with the windings of the cliff along the heights to Rathness.

For a moment or two it was as though, having found it, he had found also the goal he sought. Sinking down upon it he lay with his head pillowed on his arms breathing deeply and half-unconscious with fatigue. Presently, however, some shrill noise of the night, some bird in the fields above him, some sea-gull in the depths beneath, startled him from his uncomfortable repose and set him on his feet again, feeling his way along the path.

He could see now before him the few faint lights of the town, of which one, nearer and brighter than all the rest, was close down to the shore, and after what seemed to him a long time, the path led him quite close to this light. It

was shining from the little square window of a cottage standing among the dunes, and it fell upon the approaching traveller as though it were a search-light.

A strange-looking sight he was. He might have been any age from twenty to thirty, but he was so slight and fair that in the dimness he seemed but a youth. He was pale as a ghost too, and smeared with mud, and dripping wet from his capless head to his bare feet. He wore a uniform with gleaming metal about it, but of what colour originally, no man could have told. Trails of green seaweed were wisped round some of the buttons. He might have been a drowned man coming back from the very depths.

He went straight to the door like one who had often been there before, and, after knocking and receiving no answer, he lifted the latch and entered the house. The door led straight into the living-room, and there, before a great fire of driftwood, an aged fisherman was sitting. He was dressed as for the sea, even to a blue-peaked cap and jersey and was sitting with his back to the door, a lean, weather-beaten but still sinewy old figure, resting his elbows on his knees and holding his horny brown hands outstretched to the blaze. He took no notice of the door opening.

The young man stood as though wrapped in thought, looking silently at the old one, till presently some slight movement he made, or perhaps the intensity of his gaze caused his unconscious host to look round and become aware of him.

Then at once a bewildered, half-pleased, half-scared expression came into the withered face.

"Ha!" he said. "It's the Mate. It's the Mate come back."

The stranger did not answer for a moment. It seemed as though he could not. Some overwhelming emotion held him silent. But when, as though thinking he were some silent apparition, the old man rose and turned towards him, staring—

"Yes, it's the Mate, Sandy," he said. "It's the Mate come back."

There was something strange and passionate in the questioner's eyes and voice, but old Sandy saw nothing of it.

"But how is it ye have come now?" he said. "The boats is no' in yet, an' Willie's is no' to be in till the mornin'."

Then, looking at him more closely, he said—

"Aha! but ye're weet, laddie. Ye've been in the saut watter. Nae hairm has come to them oot there, has there?"

The Mate, as he had called himself, was again silent for a moment as he gazed keenly, almost wildly, into the old eyes looking back into his. Nothing, however, could he see in them, for all his gazing, but a little anxiety and a great kindliness.

"No, no," he said, hoarsely at last. Then, after a moment, he added, "It's long since we met, Sandy, nearly five years. The boats have been out and in many a time since then. Much has happened."

Again he watched the old man's face with his passionately keen glance.

"Ay," said the old man. "Much has happened as you say. She is gone that used to sit in that chair there. Sit ye doon an' I'll tell ye aboot her. She was aye rale fond o' you. She would ha' welcomed ye back. But she's gone. They say the grief killed her."

"The grief?" said the Mate, almost in a whisper. "What grief was that, Sandy?"

A puzzled expression came over the kindly old face.

"Noo that ye've mindit me," he said, "the laddies is no' oot in the boat the nicht. The 'Petronella's' laid up at the back o' the hoose there, an' they're dead, baith Sandy an' Willie. They were drooned keepin' the Germans oot o' the Forth. A damned U-boat it was that killed them."

He spoke quietly and dreamily, nodding a little to the fire. It was plain that he was not realising what he was

saying, but merely repeating, parrot-like, something he had heard.

Dismay and relief were in the Mate's eyes as he looked at him.

"He does not remember," he said to himself, strangely moved.

"Sandy," he said aloud. "I have had an—accident, and my clothes are dripping like they used to be when we came in in the mornings sometimes. For the sake of these old days will you lend me a jersey and breeks and boots, all as old and done as possible for I may never be able to return them?"

"Ay, ay," said the old man. "Is that what ye're wantin'? Gang ben the room there, then, an' ye'll find plenty. She pit them in there in the press. I mind seein' her at it the day afore she took badly. Sandy's an' Willie's is a' in there, except what's at the bottom o' the sea—at the bottom o' the sea," he repeated dreamily.

He sat down at the fire again as he spoke, turning his back to the visitor and spreading his hands to the blaze once more. When the little oil lamp was lifted from the table and taken into the next room he did not move, and did not seem to notice what had happened, but sat on in the firelight whispering to himself at intervals, till, rigged up in blue jersey and trousers and old boots without bootlaces, the Mate reappeared.

He was paler than ever as he set the lamp upon the table again. In his other hand he carried in a bundle the clothes he had taken off.

"Good night to you, Sandy," he said as the old man still took no notice.

At the word Sandy turned again in his chair.

"Guid nicht, laddie," he said. "Are ye for awa' up the road again? Tell Mr. Carruthers I was askin' for him. An' I'll tell *her* ye was here," he added, "when I see her."

The Mate had almost reached the door, but at this on a

sudden impulse he retraced his steps across the room and went close up to the old man.

"Sandy," he said hoarsely, laying his hand on the bowed shoulder, "she used to say, 'God go with you,' when we went away out in the night time. But—since I was here last—some of us have been taught to hate and loathe the very name of God. She said another thing sometimes, though—she said, 'My love goes with you.' Will you say that for her now?"

"Ay, ay, Mate," said Sandy, "my love goes with ye, my love goes with ye."

A slight hand grasped his suddenly, held it close for the space of a breath, then dropped it. A moment later the door had opened and closed again, and Sandy was alone once more.

He was still sitting there when his son-in-law, David Craig, big and bearded, and in his sea-boots, as he had come from the boat, came in, crossed the room, and laid his hand on the old man's shoulder just where the other slight one had lain.

Sandy looked round, startled, but seeing only his son-in-law there—

"It's you, Davy?" he said. "I thocht it was the Mate again."

"The Mate?" said David, smiling indulgently. "Lord bless ye, the Mate hasna been here for near five year—nor wouldna need to be," he added under his breath. "What's garred ye think o' the Mate, grandfeyther?"

"Because he was here," persisted the old man. "He was standin' whaur you are noo, it's no' an hour syne."

"God's sake!" exclaimed David. "Ye're dreamin', feyther. Ye never mean that Mr. Ascher was here? Mr. Carruthers's boarder that was mair like oor boarder he was that often here near five year syne?"

"He was here," said the old man calmly, "an' standin' jist whaur you are noo."

"Staundin' whaur I am noo?" said David incredulously.

"Ay," said the old man, "an' the watter was dreepin' aff him."

"Lord help's," muttered David. "Will the auld man ha' seen a ghaist?"

At the same moment, however, looking down at the floor, he saw a dark patch on the flag-stone near his foot, and stooping down he touched it.

"Ay, it is weet sure enough," he said, looking round the room awestricken.

"Ay," said the old man, looking dreamily at the fire, "an' he askit me for a change o' claes he was that dreepin', an' I said to gang ben the room an' find them in the press whaur she pit them—a' except the anes that's at the bottom o' the sea—the bottom o' the sea," he repeated in a whisper.

The face of the younger man had flushed to a dark brick-red.

"An' did he say whaur he was bound for wi' his change o' claes?" he said slowly. "But no," he added. "He wouldna say that."

At that moment, however, the door opened again.

"Wouldna say what?" said a brisk little voice behind him, and his brisk little wife, Jess, entered, hatted and coated, from what she called a raid for messages to the town. Though the top of her hat barely reached his shoulder, Jess's tongue was more than a match for David's, any day.

"Wouldna say what?" she repeated as he did not answer.

"Jess," said her husband, "a queer thing's happened, an' I'm glad ye've come in, lass, to let's hear what ye think aboot it. Ye mind yon lad Ascher that was boardit wi' Mr. Carruthers an' that we used to call the Mate—that cam' sae often here in yer mither's time to gang oot in the boats?"

"Do I mind my ain name?" said Jess. "Of coorse I mind the Mate."

"Aweel he was here the nicht," said David in a low voice. "He cam' in dreepin' weet, though it hasna rained since

yesterday mornin'. Yer feyther saw him an' let him change hissel' into claes that was Willie's an' Sandy's. He's aff wi' them on him noo, awa' wha kens whaur?"

"Weel?" said Jess, as though expectantly. "Is that a'?"

"Is that no' enough?" said David. "Are ye mindin' what the Mate is?"

"An' if he *is* a German," said Jess defiantly, "as lang's he's the Mate we used to ken, what although?"

"What although?" cried David. "She says 'What although?' "

"An' I say as weel," said Jess, "that there's Germans an' Germans as weel as Scotch an' Scotch, an' one thing I'm certain o' ye'd never ken he was a German."

"Ay, but that's jist what bothers me," said David. "There he is let louse noo in Rathness an' no' a sowl, it's likely, kennin' him for what he is. I'm thinkin', Jess, my lass, sorry as I am to ha' to dae't, that it's my plain duty to stap awa' doon-by to the coast-gairds an' inform aboot him."

"Tach! Coast-gairds!" said Jess. "The Mate wouldna hairm naebody. He may ha' been a German but he was a gentleman, an' I dinna care wha hears me."

"Ye never ken, though," said David uneasily. "When a's said an' dune ye ken, Jess, he *is* a German."

"Aweel there's one thing I'm certain o'," said Jess again, "he's daein' naething German in Rathness. But if you can dae sic a thing to a laddie that was as fine a laddie as ony laddie ye could wish to see, awa' to yer coast-gairds an' clipe on him, but it's *you* then that will be the German!"

The scorn in her voice was only equalled by the fire in her black eyes.

"A laddie that my mither was sae fond o'!" she added. "I tell ye, wherever I saw him, if I saw him in Hell, if I saw him in Germany itsel', I would ken he had got there by some mishappenin'!"

"Ye're an awfu' woman," said David, scratching his head

in perplexity, "an' I daursay ye're richt, I was fond o' the laddie mysel'. But what I would like to ken——"

"An' what I would like to ken," broke in Jess sharply, "is when ye're gaun tae staund oot o' my road an' let me get the supper ready."

She made the supper an extra good one, and after it was over kept David busy about the house until it was time for him to go to bèd that he might be ready for the lobster-pots in the early morning. That he was still dissatisfied as to the course of action he was pursuing, however, was evident from the remarks he made from time to time during the evening, now to himself, grumbling them into his beard, now to Jess, who made no reply to them.

After old Sandy and he had gone to bed, however, Jess remained, as she often did, doing some mending in the kitchen, and, as she mended, she thought of nothing but the Mate, and of why he had come to them, and of what he was doing. Suddenly, as she paused to thread her needle, a thought struck her.

"If it was him," she said to herself, "he'd have left something behind him. He never changed hissel' here afore without leavin' something."

But still she went on mending.

At last, however, when snores from the box-bed where Sandy slept, and from the upstairs loft where David had preceded her, announced that for all practical purposes she was alone in the house, she slipped off her thimble, rose softly from her seat, and taking up the lamp from the table went into the inner room.

It was the best room of the house, half parlour and half bedroom, and had an austere and gloomy look to Jess because of its gloomy associations, for here the dead of the family who had had the luck to die ashore had been laid out, and here their funeral services had for generations been held. On the walls, amid other more highly-coloured and lightsome adornments, photographs of tombs and In Memoriam verses, framed in black, were conspicuous.

Jess was not concerned that night with any of these, however. Lamp in hand she went straight to the cupboard to which Sandy had directed Ascher, and opening it wide she looked it over carefully. Then turning she examined the floor. Dark stains on the carpet showed where the Mate's wet things had been flung, but none remained to show of what nature they had been. So at least she thought at first, but just as she was about to return to her mending her quick eye caught sight of a corner of cloth sticking out from under the valence of the bed.

She kneeled down beside it without touching it, and, after staring at it fascinated for a moment, she rose and going back to the kitchen brought the tongs from the fire-place. With these she gripped the protruding corner and dragged a waistcoat from its hiding-place. It was torn and discoloured to a degree, but she could see at a glance that it was part of a uniform—a uniform unlike any she had ever seen. With the tongs she lifted it, then, the lamp in one hand and the tongs in the other, she returned to the kitchen, and moving swiftly to the fire, now a glow of red cinders, she thrust her discovery deep into the heart of it.

. . . . . .

This, it is probable, would have been the last of the Mate so far as the house of Sandy was concerned, if it had not been for Janet Craig—Big Janet—David's sister. Though she did not look like it she was what is called a Temporary, and at the moment she was filling the post of cook at the Carruthers' house.

On that same night, because it was the housemaid's night out, she was sitting all alone in her kitchen. Not being so fond of any society as her own, she was thoroughly enjoying her solitude and having the fire to herself, when, to her disgust, she was disturbed by the front-door bell ringing.

Though still comparatively early it was dark outside and she spent some time in lighting the stump of candle in the lantern which was now always carried to the door to take the place of the hall gas. She did not hurry, not seeing, as

she said to herself, why she should, and, before she had left the kitchen, the bell rang again, urgently, almost violently, which put her back up.

Now Big Janet's back when up, which it very often was, as many a mistress knew well, was very formidable. It had been known to interfere with and upset the most carefully arranged plans, to impair for days at a time the comfort of entire households. It was the secret force, though its owner did not know it, which had levered James Carruthers out of Rathness.

"Her sense of injury is so continuous, so all-pervasive, and so penetrating," he had complained, "that really, Clara, I am unable to work properly anywhere within the radius of it."

When he rang then for the second time before Big Janet was ready to attend to him, the Mate, for it was none other, set much more in motion than the bell. He was all unaware of this, however, when the door opened and Big Janet stood before him, herself almost invisible among the shadows in the passage, but throwing the light of the lantern well upon him. He was unaware, too, that the moment she saw him she recognised him, in spite of, perhaps because of, the fisherman's garb he was wearing, for the last time she had set eyes upon him had been down at old Sandy's house, in the old pre-war days when he had been as one of them. She said nothing of this, however, being ever disinclined to communicate her thoughts, however interesting they might be, to anybody. All she did was to hold the lantern a little lower so that her own large square-jawed countenance was more in shadow.

"Is Mr. Carruthers in?" said the Mate, or, to call him by his real name, Martin Ascher.

"No, he's not in," said Big Janet, with grim and unconcealed satisfaction.

"Can you tell me when he will be in?"

"No," said Big Janet.

"Then is Miss Carruthers in?"

"No."

"Can you tell me when she will be in?"

"No."

There was a moment's pause and all around was so still that a leaf from a tree near by could be heard dropping upon the pavement.

"I have come a long way," said Martin, and there was a sound of deadly weariness in his voice. "I am very anxious to see Mr. Carruthers. I should like to come in and wait for him if I may."

The eyes looking out of the darkness behind the lantern gleamed and hardened.

"I'm sorry," said Big Janet. "I can't allow all and sundry into the house, after dark, in war-time."

There was a moment's pause again before Martin answered.

"Perhaps you will be good enough," he said then, stiffly, though his voice was weak with exhaustion, "to direct me to where Mr. Carruthers is at present?"

"Sorry it's against orders," said Big Janet.

Some wandering spirit of compunction, however, passing by just then, must have moved her.

"I'll tell ye where *Miss* Carruthers is, though," she said. "She's round at 3 Canmore Place—Mrs. Abercrombie's."

If he had not been so tired the traveller would have noticed that she gave him no further directions as to how to find Canmore Place, as would have been natural to a stranger, especially on such a night. He noticed nothing, however.

"Thank you," he said shortly, and turning on his heel he set forth again into the heavy darkness.

Big Janet watched him till he disappeared, limping in his old boots, round the corner. Then shutting the door she went back to her kitchen again and taking writing-materials from a drawer in the dresser she sat down near the lamp to write a letter.

It was a very short letter when it was done, but like

Sydney Smith she took a long time to compose it, biting the end of her pen-holder occasionally, and cogitating deeply after each brief sentence.

At last, however, it was finished.

The housemaid, returning from her night out, found her dropping it into the pillar-box at the end of the street.

"Hullo, Janet!" she said jocosely, being still in her night-out mood. "Is't a love-letter?"

"It's no' to ony sweetheart o' yours onyway," retorted Big Janet, and no more was said about it.

. . . . . .

Miss Carruthers had hardly had time to cross the square before Mrs. Abercrombie was on her way to finish her packing, and half an hour later she was hard at work in her room upstairs when once more the front-door bell rang noisily.

"Bother!" she muttered, for she was now all anxiety to be ready, and had found that the preparations might take longer than she had thought they would. Reflecting, however, that it might be Miss Carruthers come back she took up one of the candles on her dressing-table and proceeded once more to the entrance-hall.

"Well?" she said, as she opened the door, so sure was she, somehow, of seeing Miss Carruthers.

No Miss Carruthers was there, however, but a slight boyish-looking figure clad in a jersey a size too big for him and rough weather-stained blue trousers. He was standing, pale as death, on the steps outside, his fair hair giving him a ghostly aspect, and, though he held himself erect, she could see that he was trembling, and that one hand was resting, as though for support, on the railing beside him.

"I am sorry," he said, "to trouble you so late, but I was told I might find Miss Carruthers here."

As he spoke—unshaven, smeared with mud as his face was, altered, ravaged, an indefinable remembrance came to Mrs. Abercrombie.

"I am sure I have seen you before," she said impulsively and irrelevantly as was her custom.

A faint flush rose in the sunken cheeks.

"Very possibly," was the answer, "though you may never have spoken to me. Nor do I know Miss Carruthers, but her brother was my tutor here for some time before Miss Carruthers came to stay with him, and it is really Mr. Carruthers that I want to see, urgently, to-night if possible. The servant at the house would give me no information, except that Miss Carruthers was probably——"

Here the steady voice trailed off into silence and the speaker swayed where he stood.

"You are very tired," said Mrs. Abercrombie suddenly. "Come in and sit down for a moment while I tell you about it. Miss Carruthers has just gone."

"Just gone?" he echoed, and there was a note of despair in his voice. He came into the hall, however, and sank down on the nearest chair.

"Thank you," he said, smiling faintly at Mrs. Abercrombie's concerned face. "It is good of you, and I *am* tired."

"*Now* I know where I have seen you!" said Mrs. Abercrombie suddenly again. "Though I don't always remember faces I was sure I had seen yours. But not here—it was in London at a concert before the war—when Ysaye played the César Franck Sonata with Pugno. Do you remember?"

"Do I *not* remember?" exclaimed Ascher, sitting up. "And do you mean to say that you were there too?"

"Was I not?" said Mrs. Abercrombie, seating herself on a chair opposite and holding her candle recklessly askew. "And your delight in the César Franck was better even than Ysaye. I had not enjoyed a concert for many years as I did that concert, and that was because of you, and the memories you brought back to me of one who was like you. So you see I owe you something. I have thought of you often since. Will you tell me your name? You know, I suppose, that I am Mrs. Abercrombie?"

"I guessed it," he said, smiling. Then suddenly grave again, he said, "My name is Ascher. Martin Ascher."

"And you have come a long way to-night?" she said gently.

At this, to her surprise and dismay, his eyes filled with tears and his lips worked convulsively for a moment before he controlled them sufficiently to answer.

"A long way," he said at last. "In fact," he paused again to steady his voice, "I was cast ashore some hours ago at the foot of the cliffs—that's why I am in this dress. I changed at a fisherman's house."

Before he had finished speaking Mrs. Abercrombie was on her feet.

"You were cast ashore?" she exclaimed. "You have been nearly drowned! And I sit here talking to you of concerts!"

"Oh, it's—it's all right," he said, rising too and half-laughing at the energy of her distress. "Only—*can* you tell me where Mr. Carruthers is?"

"Yes I can," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "He is not in Rathness just now. He is at a place called Wood End, somewhere near the middle of Scotland."

The half smile died from the face of Ascher while he reddened slowly and then paled to the very lips.

"Oh, then—I had better go," he said. "Good night and thank you again, Mrs. Abercrombie."

He turned towards the door, but in a moment Mrs. Abercrombie had placed herself squarely between it and him.

"Not one step do you go," she said, "at least until you have rested. Are you forgetting that we are old friends, that it is four years and more since César Franck and Ysaye introduced us? Where would you go, besides, on this dark night, tired out as you are? You don't know Miss Carruthers, you say? Well I do, and though she is an excellent woman, she is at present completely in the hands of Janet —Big Janet—do you know her?"

"No—unless it is the woman who turned me away from

the door," said Ascher, smiling a little again in spite of everything.

"That would be her. It's just like her. Well now—were you thinking of going back to her?"

"No," said Ascher, "but——"

"Is there anywhere else where you would be sure of a welcome?" said Mrs. Abercrombie.

He paused for a moment before replying, and Mrs. Abercrombie, as her manner was, when she was what Archibald had been wont to call en train, answered herself for him.

"No," she said. "I am sure there is not, and—pardon me—have you any money?"

He flushed again suddenly up to the roots of his fair hair.

"No," he said. "You see I had intended——"

"You had intended to ask Mr. Carruthers for the loan of some," said Mrs. Abercrombie, "and so you shall—if you will only be guided by me. Strange to say, I am going to this very place—Wood End—where he is staying just now—to-morrow. You will rest here to-night and go with me, and when we get there Mr. Carruthers—whom I have known since his pinafore days—will pay me back and arrange everything for you."

His face changed once more, and she looked away hastily, setting down her candle, and pretending to be busy with the closing of the door. She was already turning the key in the lock when she felt his hand on her arm.

"Stop," he said hoarsely. "I do not know how to thank you—but, before you do this, you should know——"

"I know enough," she interrupted him, patting the cold hand on her sleeve with her other hand, and looking up, with tears in her own eyes, at his moved face. "I know that you have been in trouble—hellish trouble of some kind—that does not bear speaking about, or even thinking of, yet. Some day you will tell me. But now come in to the fire. It's the only one in the house, so we can make it a good one."

She passed before him into the drawing-room and, kneel-

ing down on the hearth-rug, began recklessly piling on coal.

"Come and sit down," she commanded, turning where she kneeled. For he was standing motionless and silent upon the threshold. Then all at once he burst out passionately like a child—

"I don't know what to do—I don't know what to do. . . . You are too good—It is all too good. . . . I cannot bear . . ."

Here he broke off suddenly, and covering his face with his hands, fell to bitter, silent weeping.

Without another word she rose and, going to him, led him unresistingly by the arm to her own low chair, and leaving him bent double there in an agony of distress, she went out quietly, closing the door behind her.

When she returned after a considerable interval during which she had been wrestling with supper-making downstairs, he had risen and was standing looking at the portrait of Archibald over the piano.

"Ah—you are making acquaintance with him too," said Mrs. Abercrombie, as he hastened forward to meet her, "so you should, so you should. It was of him you reminded me—that time at the concert. He was my husband."

She busied herself preparing the supper-table then, her guest helping her, it occurred to her, just as though it had been one of her own nephews. And with this thought another came.

"Would you like a wash and a change?" she said. "I have plenty of things upstairs."

The wash he accepted with alacrity, but was strangely reluctant about the change. She would take no denial, however. Before very long he was seated at the supper-table attired in a tweed suit of Reggie's, and, as his hostess said, like another being.

And the portrait, it seemed to her, looked down upon him kindly, yet with the old glimmer of amusement at the corners of the mouth. It seemed too, as the original would

have done, to have fascinated the guest. He kept looking up at it curiously as he ate and drank.

"Did he play?" he said at last, nodding slightly towards the piano, a beautiful Bechstein concert grand.

"Ah, my dear——" said Mrs. Abercrombie. That was all. Then she looked away at the fire in silence.

Ascher watched her for a few moments in silence also. Then—

"Would you—may I play to you afterwards?" he said diffidently.

Mrs. Abercrombie almost leaped round in her chair.

"*Rather!*" she exclaimed enthusiastically. "As soon as —and for as long as you want to."

She rejoiced at the proposal, welcoming the playing as a relief to the mysterious grief that seemed to be lying heavily still, in spite of all her efforts, upon her spirit as well as his.

"Rather!" she said again.

Without waiting for more, he rose and went to the piano. Then, opening it, he sat down and struck a few preluding chords.

"Ah, this is good!" said Mrs. Abercrombie, settling herself then and there to listen, for long experience of Archibald's moods and fancies had given her the delightful faculty of being ready at any time for anything, without delays or things to do first.

"Go on," she said. "Go on for as long as you like."

She was glad to hear that he laughed a little then—softly—to himself. Then he began playing.

CHAPTER III

IN WHICH SOME ACCOUNT IS GIVEN OF THE TRANSIT OF MRS. ABERCROMBIE IN THE COMPANY OF AN ENCHANTER, AND OF WHAT BEFEL THEM ON THEIR WAY TO WOOD END

SOME time in the small hours of the next morning Ascher, with the wild tender defiant tragedy of "In der Nacht," brought his programme to a close.

The fire had gone out. Mrs. Abercrombie sat absorbed.

"Are you not tired?" he said, smiling. "Do you know what the time is?"

"No," she said dreamily. "I don't. I only know that you have given me the most exquisite treat, that you are an enchanter who has been conjuring up before me old days, old scenes, old enthusiasms, old loves, old griefs. . . ."

She started up.

"But *you* must be tired!" she added. "I am a selfish brute. I had no idea it had been so long. See, I will light your candle at once. Ah! You must be very tired! How can I thank you? I can never thank you enough."

He did, indeed, look very tired. With the ceasing of the music all virtue seemed to have gone out of him, and the shadow to have closed down upon him again. Yet he strove to speak cheerfully.

"You mustn't thank me," he said. "It is I who should thank you for listening. I couldn't have played to-night at all—not one note—if it hadn't been for you."

"Yes, I *can* listen," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Archie—my husband—always said that. He, too, was very dependent upon his listeners."

He was silent, and she was moving away to a side-table,

where there were biscuits and drinks, when suddenly he burst out—

"It is you who are the enchantress," he half sobbed, "you draw the very soul out of a man! Ah—I must not wait—I must tell you——"

She looked round hastily.

His face was ghastly, his eyes were wild.

"No, no!" she exclaimed, as though to a frightened child. "Not now. You mustn't tell me now. What! After all these exquisite things—that Ravel, that Schumann—that Beethoven—I tell you I will not listen now, to anything that makes you look like that."

"But you must," he urged passionately, "or how can I stay on here? I am not what you think me. . . ."

"You *are!*" she contradicted him flatly. "I am no artist myself, but I know an artist when I hear one. And—whatever else you may be—you are an artist of the first rank, and as such I welcome you. Come—have some biscuits and this whiskey. I am a blooming fool to have let you get so over-wrought. Some day you may tell me whatever you like about yourself. For to-night, all that I will hear of allowing you to do, is to go immediately to bed."

After she had dismissed him thus, however, she did not go to bed herself. His music, as Archie's had always done in the old times, had excited her and banished sleep. She moved softly about the house, candle in hand, finishing her preparations for the morrow, and only retired to her room at the dawning because in another hour the Speed family would be upon her.

She went to bed then, but still she did not sleep. Ascher's ravaged face haunted her, his wild eyes, his passionate speech.

"Whatever can he have done?" she said to herself, "for there can be nothing so dreadful about what he *is*. If I know an artist when I hear him, I know a gentleman when I see him. He is all right in that respect. It must be some-

thing he has done. Well in war-time anything can happen. Perhaps it is shock he is suffering from. . . ."

A sudden chill came over her at this thought.

"They go mad sometimes," she said to herself.

Then she thought of James Carruthers and recovered again.

To-morrow—nay, that very day, she would be handing him over to James.

It must be admitted that when they arrived upon the scene the Speeds as a family were exemplary in their discretion. They did not so much as turn a hair when told that Mrs. Abercrombie had made up her mind to leave that day, and that a strange young gentleman, who had arrived the night before, and was now asleep in the captain's room, and on no account to be disturbed till it was absolutely necessary, was going to travel with her. Nor did they blench, at least they made no audible remark, when, on the strange young gentleman at last descending to breakfast, they found that he had not brought a particle of luggage with him except an old pair of boots without laces and a still older blue jersey and trousers. All they did—it was Mrs. Speed and Devina who were doing the bedroom—was to look at each other gravely for a moment and shake their heads in silence. Then—for Mr. Speed had been a valet, and they knew how to do it—they laid the garments out, like evening clothes, ironically on the bed.

Their former wearer, however, had not the opportunity of seeing them thus, for Mrs. Abercrombie declared when he spoke of them that she would not consent to his putting them on again. Reggie's suit was an old one, it had been left to her to give away, and if he—Ascher—was to travel with her to Wood End he must travel as befitted him and her. Devina was ordered to see that the fisherman's clothes were returned to the cottage where they belonged.

That night, accordingly, Devina, after she had finished her work for the day at 3 Canmore Place, took the jersey, the trousers, and the boots all down to Sandy's cottage.

Only old Sandy was there when she went in. He was sitting with his back to the door and muttering to the fire as usual.

"He's speakin' in to hissel'," said Devina to herself, awe-stricken, as she remembered that it was said in the town that old Sandy's mind was going.

For the credit of the Speeds, whose aim and object it was to keep themselves *to* themselves, it was as well that Jess was out. Devina otherwise could not have resisted the temptation to gossip, natural, perhaps, under the circumstances.

As it was, however, her fear of the old man's turning round caused her simply to lay her bundle on the table and retire.

"They'll know they've got them anyway," she said to herself.

And indeed that was all that David and Jess, for all their wondering and debating afterwards, ever *did* know.

. . . . . .

This happened, however, after Mrs. Abercrombie and all her luggage and her protégé had left Rathness and were trundling towards Wood End, in what the porter had called a "Stopping train," and which indeed seemed, as Mrs. Abercrombie said, to be better at stopping than at going.

Little Mrs. Jardine came to see her off at the station.

"Who is the cavalier?" she said, wondering, as Martin Ascher approached, asked for directions about the tickets, and then went off to get them.

"A friend of mine who is suffering from war-shock," said Mrs. Abercrombie, "and is going with me to Wood End to visit Mr. Carruthers."

"Ah—I see—that occult man," said Mrs. Jardine, and she glanced furtively again at Martin when he reappeared.

Over Reggie's tweeds he was wearing an old overcoat, rather long and rather light in colour, which had once been Archibald's, also a wide-awake hat of the same period. His thin face, though as pale as ever, looked serener than it had

yet done. A strange insouciance, almost nonchalance, which was undoubtedly the result of the fatigues of the night before, had possession of him that afternoon. He felt light-headed as though he were in a dream, or under the influence of an opiate. Nothing seemed to matter very much. All his surroundings seemed unreal, and he himself the most unreal of all. Since the morning it seemed to him that he had been swept along in the flood of Mrs. Abercrombie's kindness—helplessly—in spite of himself. At that moment he was merely wondering what would happen next to him.

What did happen was that he was introduced to Mrs. Jardine.

"My friend Mr. Ascher—Mrs. Jardine," said Mrs. Abercrombie genially. "And I wish you could hear him play Debussy and Ravel."

"Indeed?" said Mrs. Jardine, who was herself something of a musician. "Then you play, Mr. Ascher?"

"Play!" exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie. "I just wish you could hear him. He is a pianist—an artist—an artist of the first rank. I have not heard such playing—in a room, I mean—since the old days. He is an enchanter."

"Then it's too bad of you to take him away from Rathness," laughed Mrs. Jardine. "Where did you study, Mr. Ascher?"

"In Germany—in Berlin," he answered, watching her face.

"Ah," sighed Mrs. Jardine, "aren't you glad you've been there? For now that they have all become such brutes, of course we never can go back again."

"Are they *all* such brutes?" he said.

"My dear Mr. Ascher!" exclaimed the little lady. "Can anyone doubt it? The whole people has deteriorated. They are a nation of brutes. Don't you think so too, Mrs. Abercrombie?"

"No," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "I think that to call them so is to insult the lower animals."

Mrs. Jardine laughed.

"You always go one better, Mrs. A.," she said, "but wherever has Mr. Ascher gone to?"

They saw him presently again among the luggage.

"I am glad you are to have him with you," said Mrs. Jardine. "He seems to be a useful sort of enchanter, and you know, my dear, you are so absent-minded at times. I quite wondered how you would manage, travelling without Elizabeth."

"Elizabeth!" said Mrs. Abercrombie scornfully. "I have long since learned to do without her."

And the train coming in just at that moment made it impossible for Mrs. Jardine to contradict her.

She was preoccupied, however, as she mounted into the train, her good-byes were rather perfunctory, and no sooner were they alone in the carriage, and really started on their journey, than she turned to her companion.

"Why did you run away just now?" she said, "when we were talking about the Germans? Are you a Pro-German?"

"What exactly is meant by that?" he said.

"Don't you know?" said Mrs. Abercrombie.

"Tell me exactly," he said again.

"By Pro-German," said Mrs. Abercrombie, "is meant a person who is ready to condone things, to minimise the awfulness of the stain which has come upon civilisation by means of the German nation, who believes that men and women who set at naught every law not only of God but of man, are worthy of the slightest consideration, and who would refrain from sweeping off the face of the earth the whole cursed crew down to the very last man, woman, and child of them."

"Then they are all the same?" said Ascher, very pale. "There are no exceptions?"

"No," said Mrs. Abercrombie, "for if there were, they would leave Germany now if they had not already done so."

"What about patriotism," said Ascher. "What about loyalty?"

"Patriotism!" cried Mrs. Abercrombie. "Patriotism for a mass of putrefaction!"

"Then," said Ascher quietly, but with white lips, "only a country, that is always able to reward it, is worthy, you think, of loyalty?"

He laughed a little short laugh.

"Let's change the subject," he said. "Look how very lovely those trees are."

But Mrs. Abercrombie never so much as glanced at the trees.

"I shall certainly not change the subject," she said, with a glinting in her eyes, a lifting of her chin, and a tightening of the lips, that had come down to her from fighting ancestors. "I shall certainly not change the subject until I have your answer to my question."

"You shall have it, then, Mrs. Abercrombie," said Ascher at once, turning away again from the window and fixing his sad eyes upon her face. "I am not a Pro-German. I think all that you think about the just punishment which Germany has brought upon herself by heaped-up sins of omission and commission. I think she cannot escape it, and that, for the sake of the world at large, for the sake of honour and purity, for the sake of what in former times she herself called the true, the beautiful, the good, she must be cast out, separated, devoted to utter destruction. And"—he paused for a moment, smiling wanly, strangely at her—"since it is impossible to make distinctions—if there are any of her sons and daughters who do not deserve the disgrace and the destruction—why then—there they are—and so much the worse for them."

"Besides," he went on after a moment as Mrs. Abercrombie was still silent, "if there are any such, they will not want to desert *now*. There can be no escape for them. They cannot stampede like rats. They must go down with the sinking ship. It is the last thing left them to do for their own honour."

The silence when he had ceased to speak seemed to quiver

with some strong emotion, latent, hidden, just beneath the surface of things.

Mrs. Abercrombie vaguely, uncomfortably conscious of this, hastened to end it.

"You put it very well," she said, looking meditatively out of the window at the long bare autumn fields stretching away towards the woodlands. "I had not thought of it quite in that way before, and that about patriotism too—though I was angry with you at the moment—that was good. It reminds me of a woman I knew once—with a frightful husband, who did everything to her but kill her. Her whole life was a misery and a degradation and growing worse every day. 'Why don't you leave him?' I said to her once. 'No one would blame you, every one would think you did well to go.' 'I can't,' she said. 'Don't you see that my loyalty is the only thing I have left to me unblemished?' "

She was silent for a moment as the train trundled on its way.

"Poor exceptions!" she murmured after a little.

"Yes—poor brutes," he rejoined, "for of course they will be thought brutes—or no—to think them so would be to insult the lower animals."

They laughed together. Then Mrs. Abercrombie said—

"Were you thinking of the exceptions then? Was it that speech of mine that made you run away at the railway station?"

"No," he said, "it was that other woman laughing at it."

"But you laughed yourself just now," said Mrs. Abercrombie, wondering.

"That was different," he said gravely. "Now do let us change the subject."

They talked then about the splendours of the autumn woods, and Mrs. Abercrombie grieved that now she was seeing them for the first time that year.

"To think that while all the pageant of spring and summer was going on I was burrowing in Rathness!" she

mourned. "They all seem to be reproaching me. 'You have come late,' they say. 'We have waited long.' "

"Yes, but just because of that, perhaps you see them now the more vividly," he returned. "If the war has given us nothing else for all it has taken from us it has given us that —that vivid pleasure in the intervals. Just as a flash of lightning that kills a man may have shown him wonderful effects of light first, that if he had lived to be a hundred and one, he would never have seen otherwise."

"And would have been happier without seeing," said Mrs. Abercrombie with a little shiver, and again with the sense strong upon her of something latent and uncanny. Again, therefore, she changed the subject, and from the trees they passed to descriptive music and were discussing the score of "Pélléas and Mélisande," and the wind effects in it, when once more the train stopped.

It was a larger station than they had yet passed. There were many people on the platform, and there was a hubbub of noise. No one, however, seemed to be going to disturb them, and they were continuing their talk when the door opened and a handsome young country-woman, with a large and heavily-shawled baby in her arms, began, with many exhortations, to entrain a large family of small children.

Conversation was at an end, Mrs. Abercrombie in two minutes had lifted the youngest walking child on to her knee, and Ascher at the other end of the carriage was assisting the eldest son, a careworn boy of twelve, answering to the name of Geordie, to hoist and haul in several bundles and all his remaining brothers and sisters.

"Are ye a' richt, Mistress Forgan?" called a porter from the platform as he held the door open and looked round with experienced eye for stragglers.

"A' richt, thenk ye," replied Mrs. Forgan cheerfully, adding under her breath, "at least I hope so."

A glance round reassured her, and rolling up the baby more tightly, if that were possible, in the shawl, she sub-

sided with a sigh of relief on to the seat beside Mrs. Abercrombie.

She was plainly but neatly dressed for the most part, but she had an indescribably radiant and festive effect, and a touch of gaudiness about her accessories that seemed to accentuate her good looks. Everything she had on suited her, from her rakish green feather to her fuchsia-coloured scarf.

"Eh, mercy, I'm warm!" she said confidingly to Mrs. Abercrombie, as she proceeded to wipe her perspiring face. "It's an awfu' opery," she added, "traivellin' wi' sae mony."

"Yes, I almost wonder you attempt it," said Mrs. Abercrombie, smiling as she patted the fat legs of her charge to keep him from violently kicking her black skirt with his muddy boots.

"But I suppose," she added sympathetically, "it has to be done sometimes."

"That's so," assented Mrs. Forgan emphatically. "When ye're bein' driven proper daft wi' dullness an' loneliness—it has to be done. That's so."

"Dullness and loneliness," exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie, amazed.

"Ay," said Mrs. Forgan. "Ye wouldna think, would ye—to look at me—that I was either dull or lonely wi' sae mony bairns? But mind ye," she went on, rocking the baby who had become slightly restive gently to and fro, "if yer man was at the front an' if you lived in a wee hoose miles frae onywhere in the middle o' trees and bare fields wi' jist bairns an' never a sowl like yersel' to speak till, ye'd maybe be dull yersel'."

"I'm sure I would," said Mrs. Abercrombie warmly. "Tell me more about it. So you live right in the country, do you?"

"Ay, at Cock-ma-lone," said Mrs. Forgan. "An' it's a bonny wee place," she went on hastily as though in order to efface any bad impression, "wi' a fine wee gairden, an' it's no' awfu' far frae folk either. The nearest neebours at

the cot-hooses, when I was no' weel, was rale kindly. But —maybe ye'll ha' seen it yersel'," she went on—"they'll come to ye when ye're no' weel, but—Lord kens why it is—when ye're weel they dinna bother theirsels. An' the funny thing is that it's when ye're weel that ye want them maist whiles, mair than when ye're no' weel an' canna be bothered wi' their clashes."

Here she gathered the baby up more closely.

"Onyway," she went on, "it's eerie whiles when yer man is in the trenches. He was aye sic a cheery sowl, an' when he's playin' wi' the bairns, whiles, he's that comic ye near end yersel' wi' lauchin' at him. Dash he is by name—Dash Forgan—an' Dash he is by natur', easy pit in a rage an' easy quietened. But he's the kind o' man ye jist miss *terrible*."

"I am sure he is," said Mrs. Abercrombie, her brown eyes glistening. "And is he in the trenches now?"

"Weel, no' exac'ly *in* them," said Mrs. Forgan. "He's a transport-driver. He's rare wi' horses, an' he's no' supposed to kill onybody. But, mind you, if a German was to counter him in ane o' his rages, I wouldna answer for him!"

"Oh, we're all like that," laughed Mrs. Abercrombie. "Aren't we?" she appealed over the intervening baby to Ascher. But Ascher, who seemed to be half-buried in infants of both sexes and all sizes, did not hear her.

Mrs. Forgan regarded her other travelling companion admiringly.

"He's rale hamely wi' bairns," she said; "is he a son o' yours?"

Then without waiting for an answer, for the baby had begun wriggling again—

"He'll mak' a fine feyther onyway," she added, "when he gets a wife o' his ain."

Mrs. Abercrombie glanced again at the subject of this aside, and was almost certain that he had heard it, though he still took no notice.

Geordie was dispensing biscuits from a bag, and justice

at the same time, and Ascher was helping him. Afterwards she remembered him thus in the midst of the rosy children.

"Ay," said Mrs. Forgan again when the baby had settled once more, "that's what Dash is, an' whiles the hoose is hardly to be tholed withoot him. An' yesterday it was that dull an' muggy an' dark I was fair eerie, an' last nicht when Geordie an' Mary cam' hame frae the schule—'Geordie,' says I. 'I'm gaun tae ha' a break-oot the morn.' For it was Setturday ye ken, an' the schule would be closed. 'Are ye, Mither?' says he, for he is a rale sensible crater. An' we made it a' up on the nail, an' d'ye ken whaur we've been the day?"

"To the town," said Mrs. Abercrombie, "to look at the shops perhaps?"

"No, to the Picters," said Mrs. Forgan, "an', by jing, it's been a graund day!"

"I'm so glad you enjoyed it!" said Mrs. Abercrombie heartily, in spite of herself and of harangues she had delivered at mothers' meetings against taking young children to picture-houses. She had been right she knew, the reasons against it were still there, but somehow just then the glamour of Mrs. Forgan's delight in her "Break-oot" obscured them.

"Eh, it's been splendid!" Mrs. Forgan went on again presently as though she were unable to keep silent.

"Is this the first time you have been?" said Mrs. Abercrombie.

"Ay," said Mrs. Forgan. "It was the first time. Ye see what wi' sae mony bairns an' sae little money we never could gang anywhere afore the war—Dash an' me. But we're rich noo, for a wee while onyway. Them that has the maist bairns is the richest in war-time."

Mrs. Abercrombie was silent, adjusting herself to this new point of view.

So the war, which to most had been the abomination of desolation, was looked upon by some at least in the light of a deliverance. The country-side which she had envied her

had been a prison-house to Mrs. Forgan, even with her children round her, though she was evidently a loving mother. She had little time for cogitation, however, before Mrs. Forgan began again.

"There was a lassie in the Picter," she said, "the longest Picter. Eh, she was a treat! Twa men was efter her, a young ane wi' nae money,. ye ken, and an auld rich ane. . . . Noo, Dash, keep yer feet still an' dinna spile the leddy's dress. . . . An', jist as I would ha' done mysel' when I was her age, she ups an' awa' wi' the young good-lookin' ane. Jessie, dinna bother the gentleman, an' say thenk ye, sir, when he gi'es ye a biscuit. I'm sure he'll think ye've never been teached mainners an' me never devolvin' frae mornin' till nicht deavin' them into ye."

She frowned reproachfully at Jessie who said "Thenk ye, sir," in a thick voice, the distinctness of her articulation impaired by her mouth being full of biscuit.

"She tak's efter her feyther," her mother added aside to Mrs. Abercrombie. "A rale fine lassie, ye ken, but, wi' regaird to mainners an' sic' like, dour to drive as the nether-mill-stane."

"Aweel," she went on then, "I was tellin' ye aboot the Picters. The lassie gangs off ridin' wi' the young man on horseback, an' then the auld ane that was coortin' her afore, when he finds they're gane, he ups an' efter them in a motor-car—*then* they get intil a train an' *syne* intil an aeroplane, an' *there* they go—the young anes fleein' for their lifes an' the auld ane chasin'—till the motor gets coupit heels o'er heeds doon a cliff into the sea wi' the auld ane inside it—so that was the end o' him, puir man—but it served him richt a' the same for no' takin' no for a answer, an' I think the lassie did perfectly richt, an' eh, I've ENJOYED mysel'!"

At the word enjoyed, Mrs. Abercrombie and Ascher laughed aloud together, for there was enough zest in it to have served for half a dozen people. Mrs. Forgan laughed

too, a whole-hearted healthy laugh. Even the children grinned.

"An' sae did we all," she added, beaming round upon her progeny, not excepting the unconscious infant. "It's been worth it a'. Eh, Geordie?"

"Ay, Mither," said Geordie dutifully, but he seemed blasé and elderly beside his parent.

Perhaps, thought Mrs. Abercrombie, for he had still a careworn look, he was thinking that the "all" was not over yet.

This opinion was strengthened by his evident uneasiness. He kept peering out into the darkness, till suddenly, when the train stopped again—

"Here we are, Mither!" he exclaimed in a shrill little anxious voice. At the word, as though it had been an order to charge, the whole family crowded towards the door of the carriage, and even the baby began to cry as though determined to increase the general confusion. Geordie was the only one who kept his head. With a presence of mind beyond his years, he remembered and got down the parcels from the rack. All the others, including Mrs. Forgan, seemed to be obsessed with the idea that it was now or never.

Young Dash, when Mrs. Abercrombie held him firmly on her knee, until there should be sufficient room to move him, kicked harder than ever he had done before, and yelled when he saw his relatives departing without him. At the same time it was by the merest fluke that Ascher prevented the fourth, called Phemie, from launching herself through the window in the direction of the platform.

Manners went by the board. Farewells were forgotten.

"And yet the train is sure to wait for ages," said Mrs. Abercrombie to Ascher, shouting to make herself heard through the racket. "Do, there's a dear, just go and see the smallest ones safely off the platform and into their perambulator if they have one. It's absolutely pitch dark."

It was not, as a matter of fact. It was more grey than

dark, but it looked gloomy enough in the fields over the white paling. As she spoke, she was handing him out Dash the Second, who was so ungrateful as to go on yelling till he felt himself on the ground.

"Oh you naughty little thing!" she said. "You *have* inherited your father's temper! I have a good mind," she added, "to get out myself. They live miles from anywhere. Fancy wheeling a perambulator for miles through this darkness!"

She had one foot on the platform when Ascher stopped her.

"On no account get out," he said. "I'll manage."

And he ran off, picking up Dash the Second en route to save time, and causing him thereby to renew his demonstrations of wrath.

"They should mak' thon chap a porter to trade," said the real porter, after he had endeavoured to shout the name of the station so that it could be heard above the din, and had failed because he was hoarse with years. Even had he not been so, however, it would have made no difference to Mrs. Abercrombie, who was far too interested in the exodus of the Forgan party to pay the slightest attention to anything else. She was standing on tiptoe watching the last of them disappearing when she felt the carriage begin to move and realised that she was off again without Ascher.

"How very annoying?" she said aloud to herself. "And I have the tickets, too."

"Ay, it's a peety," said a voice behind her. It sounded like a hen speaking.

She turned with a start and beheld an elderly woman who must have entered unnoticed in the pandemonium. She had a very high forehead and a still higher bonnet decorated with black roses. She had besides small heavy-lidded eyes, a short nose, hanging cheeks, and no chin to speak of.

"But ye canna help it," she added after a moment, drawing her old-fashioned dolman more closely round her. "Ye

canna help it noo whatever ye dae, an' that should be a comfort to ye."

Mrs. Abercrombie laughed.

"Do you think so?" she said, sitting down opposite this new travelling companion and surveying her with appreciation. "Do you really think so?"

"Ay do I," said the woman, "as sure as my name's Betsy Paterson"—she pronounced it Peyterson—"an' I've thocht it for thirty year. When ye can help a thing, it's worryin', for then ye dinna ken whether or no. But when it's past an' ye canna help it whatever ye dae, it's a' richt."

"I don't agree with you at all," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Do you mean to say it's all right that my friend should have been left behind at that last station when his destination was Wood End?"

There was silence for a moment as though the oracle on the opposite seat were pondering the problem which had been proposed to her. Mrs. Abercrombie, watching her, became quite anxious to hear her answer.

It came at last with a little wry smirk.

"What destiny did ye say yer friend was bound for?" she asked.

"Wood End," said Mrs. Abercrombie.

"An' you?" said Betsy. "Whaur are you bound for?"

"For Wood End, too," was the reply.

"Aweel, Mistress," said Betsy, evidently enjoying herself hugely, "I alloo that I was wrang this time—pairtly. But it's no' only me that's wrang. In fac'," she paused for a moment as if to give her next words due effect, "*he's* the only ane that's *no'* wrang."

"*He?*" said Mrs. Abercrombie, bewildered.

"The gentleman," explained Betsy.

"Whatever do you mean?" said Mrs. Abercrombie.

"I mean," said Betsy, "that if it was Wood End that he was wantin' he's a' richt, for that last station was Wood End."

She laughed, when she had finished, with a cackling

sound, ending on a long high skirl, that in spite of everything compelled Mrs. Abercrombie to join her. Before the train stopped again at a station called Longshaws, she and Betsy were already on the best of terms.

Her new friend had not been able to give her any further information, having only been on a visit to Wood End and knowing nothing of the neighbourhood.

All the advice, however, which she had time to give, she gave.

"An' see an' tak' care o' yersel' in the dark," was her parting injunction, "for, mind you, neither you nor me is as young as we once was."

"Weel, as I canna help that whatever I dae," replied Mrs. Abercrombie with an excellent Scotch accent, "I suppose it'll be a' richt."

At this Betsy's cackle began again, and the last that Mrs. Abercrombie saw and heard of her newest acquaintance was her high bonnet nodding out of the carriage window, and her final ecstatic shriek as she was borne away into the darkness.

. . . . . .

It was all very well, however, to bandy jests about her predicament. Mrs. Abercrombie was in no enviable position.

From the porter—a slow-witted youth—who came up to ask her for her ticket, she learned that there was no train back that night to Wood End, and that, by the turn-pike road, she was at least six miles from it.

"And there's nae cabs," he added.

"I had not supposed so," said Mrs. Abercrombie, looking round.

If it had been dark at Wood End, it was still darker at Longshaws, for, beyond the white paling, there was nothing to be seen but trees.

"This is the Wood, I suppose," reflected Mrs. Abercrombie, and she blenched a little within herself as she thought of the six miles.

"Is there no other road?" she said aloud.

"There's the Cuttin'," said the porter. "It tak's ye straicht through and it's jist three mile."

"I'll go by that," said Mrs. Abercrombie.

The porter stared in silence for a moment. Then he began to grin slowly, much as Elizabeth would have done.

"Ye'll never dae that," he said confidently.

"Which is the Cutting?" said Mrs. Abercrombie, taking no notice either of his grin or his opinion. "Is that it?" she went on, pointing with her umbrella to where the faint light from the one lamp on the platform illuminated a tunnel-like opening in the trees.

"Ay," he said, and she began to move forward.

"But ye canna gang that way," he added. "It's an awfu' road the Cuttin'. It's no' for the likes o' you. Wait an' I'll tell the station-master."

This, of course, was the one thing needed to start Mrs. Abercrombie off. That she who had travelled all over Europe, not to speak of more distant parts of the world, should be patronised as the woman who had missed her station by a country station-master was not tolerable. Grasping her umbrella in one hand and her bag in the other, she was on her way to the gate before the words were well out of the porter's mouth.

"Good night," was all the answer he received, and next moment she had vanished all but her ticket.

. . . . . .

Ten minutes afterwards the station-master, having finished his not over-arduous duties for that time, turned his steps in the direction of his house whose little red-curtained window, glowing like a danger signal, was beckoning him back to the comfortable meal he had left. Awaiting him there were his wife, a little hatchet-faced, sparse-haired woman who was making fresh tea for him at the fire, and her counterpart, a little hatchet-faced, sparse-haired man, very obviously her brother, who was sitting munching toast rather disconsolately at the table. He was a much more important person than he appeared to be, for he had no

social ambitions and was naturally of a retiring nature, but he was none other than Peter Dunwiddie of Wood End, Family Grocer, General Merchant, and Post Office keeper of that ilk. Moreover, since the war had reft away all the active and some even of the inactive men of that place he was the Individual, as the minister had said to him in his last speech before he left for the battle-front, to whom The Whole Community would turn for advice and help.

Being a very conscientious man, and having a profound admiration for his minister, this thought had sorely worried Peter ever since it had been expressed, and never had it worried him more than when he sat there ruminating at his brother-in-law's board. To his sister's chagrin he had refused, until his host should have made his appearance, to put his very evident uneasiness into words. The entry of the station-master was therefore hailed by his wife, whose curiosity was sore on edge, with more than her usual enthusiasm.

"Here's John noo, Peter," she said as her husband entered, and with a brief "Hullo, Peter," took his seat opposite his guest.

Silence, however, still prevailed, except for the sound of toast-munching.

"Peter was wantin' to speak to ye, John," said Mrs. M'Kendrick at last, unable to bear any more.

"Aweel, then, speak up, Peter," said John, comfortably pouring his tea into his saucer to cool it. "What is't?"

Thus adjured, Peter dived his hand into his pocket and brought out a half-sheet of paper.

"Read that," he said, handing it over. "I got it by the post this afternoon."

M'Kendrick took the paper which was inscribed with about half a dozen lines of large irregular printing, done in pale ink.

"To the Chief of the Special Constables, Wood End," it ran, "look out for an Enemy Alien. This is urgent and important, and is a sure message from one who does not wish

to be known but who *knows*. Rathness, Eastshire, October, 1918."

Mrs. M'Kendrick had stationed herself at her husband's shoulder, and was also reading the message.

"The Chief o' the Special Constables! Is that you, Peter?" she asked.

"Ay, for I am the only ane noo since the meenister left," said Peter gloomily. "It's awfu'," he added, "to be sae understaffed."

"Hoots!" said his sister. "The ither police'll help ye."

"No' them," said Peter. "I tried them first. 'Is it watch oot?' they said. 'Then watch awa', Dunwiddie. We're no' hinderin' ye.' That's a' *they* said."

"But that's impidence!" exclaimed Mrs. M'Kendrick. "If I was you, Peter, I would lodge a complaint."

"Ah, but then ye see ye're no' me," said her brother.

Which was very true as his sister recognised. A man dependent upon the goodwill of the public could not afford to offend the police.

"No' like's he was a government offeecial," she explained to her husband afterwards, "like you or me, John."

She was therefore silenced.

Her husband, however, had by this time found speech.

"It's a queer thing, Peter," he said, as he smoothed the mysterious message out on the table before him, "but a stranger arrived here by this train—Gibbie the porter laddie was jist tellin' me—a rale madam o' a woman that he's never seen here afore. An', say what he likit, naething would please her but she would set oot walkin' to Wood End doon the Cuttin', sayin' she had missed her station or some sic rubbitch."

"Walkin' doon the Cuttin' at this time o' nicht?" exclaimed Mr. Dunwiddie.

"Ay, an' in a fell hurry," said the station-master. "Gibbie said that for a elderly woman it was fearsome to see her startin' awa' into the wud withoot a licht. He was that

ta'en up aboot it that he clean forgot to mak' her pay the difference frae Wood End to here."

"An' she never mindit him?" said Mrs. M'Kendrick. "Eh, that was *rale* German!"

"John," said Peter, leaning forward with round eyes across the table. "Is it possible, think ye?"

He paused for a reply.

"I think," said John weightily, "that if I was you, Peter, I would be efter her. Ye canna be wrang either way, whether or no."

Peter pondered for some time before replying. "Ye may be richt, John," he said at last. "I'm no' sayin' ye're no' richt. At the same time ye may be wrang, an' in my opeenion this is no' a thing that should be ram-stam gane into."

"I'm no' denyin' that," said John. "But it's no' as if ye was gaun to arrest her ye ken. Ye'll jist be followin' her, seein' whaur she's bound for."

At this Mr. Dunwiddie rose, but though he put on his cap he still remained stationary.

"An' what if she *is* a Gairman an' gaun aboot airmed?" he said. "She micht turn upon me in the wud if she heard me followin' her."

"Aweel, Peter, it'll be for you no' to let her hear ye," said the station-master. "But if ye're feared to gang, sit doon again, an' let's ha' wer tea in peace."

"No, John," said Peter, firmly and resolutely, pushing back his chair. "I'll no' say I'm no' feared, for that would be a lee, but I'm no' that feared but that I can dae my duty. Sae guid nicht to ye, Kirsty an' John, an' if ye never see me again in life, guid-bye to ye as weel!"

"Eh, John, dinna let him gang!" cried Mrs. M'Kendrick. "Ye'd never forgi'e yersel' if you was to be his death!"

"Hoots!" said John. "What hairm can come tae him frae an auld woman?"

"Then gang you wi' him, John," implored his wife. "Dinna send him awa' his lane."

"Na," said John, "I ken my duty better. If ony Germans is aboot, my place is at my post."

"He's richt," said Peter, moving towards the door. "An' I dinna want him wi' me either. By God's mercy I ha' my rubber-soled boots on, an' she micht hear *him* when she didna hear *me*."

"Ay, so she would, Peter," said John. "My—but ye're a guid-plucked ane, man! I'll tell the meenister when he comes back, an' yer intended that's to be—Eh, Peter? My she'll be the prood woman!"

To this remark he was surprised to receive no answer but a vigorous dig in the ribs from his wife. Acting, however, upon long experience, he responded by an immediate change of subject.

"If ye tak' my advice ye'll gang by the stubble-field an' cut her aff at the cross-roads, Peter," he said hastily. "It would be a peety if ye was to miss her."

"I'll no' miss her," said Peter grimly.

. . . . . .

"What was yon for?" said the station-master presently, when they had returned from shouting parting directions from the door-step, and were reseating themselves at their tea-table.

He was referring to the dig in the ribs.

"It was to stop ye sayin' ony mair aboot intendeds," said Mrs. M'Kendrick. "I heard the day that Young Ellen Binnie is to be mairriet to Bob Lindsay o' Broadlees."

"Never!" exclaimed her husband.

"It's true," said Mrs. M'Kendrick; "sae if Bob's spared, when he gangs back to the trenches, it's a' up wi' Peter."

"Aweel, I wouldna ha' believed it," said M'Kendrick. "A canny lass like Young Ellen preferrin' Bob Lindsay tae a sensible man! No' to say, a' the same, but that Peter's gettin' gey auld an' wizened-like."

"Young Ellen's no' that young hersel'," said Mrs. M'Kendrick.

Then after the space of a mouthful or so she added,

"But maybe Bob'll no' be spared."

"Maybe no'," returned her husband. "There's chances for the auldest and the wizenedest o' us in war-time."

. . . . . .

It was not until she had passed beyond the last glimmer of the station lamp that Mrs. Abercrombie realised that she would have been the better of her electric torch. She was not in the habit of using it, because as she said—if she saw nobody without it, nobody could see her, also it dazzled her and was more of a hindrance than a help. This, however, was in the streets of Rathness, which three winters of war had made as familiar to her in the dark as the windings of its rabbit-warren are to a rabbit. She had, for she was as adaptable to altered conditions as most of those whom she would have called the higher animals, acquired the habit of avoiding obstacles by some sixth sense, and finding her way with her feet. But it was one thing to find her way along the paved paths and the carefully levelled roads of Rathness, and quite another to walk down the Cuttin', which seemed to consist of a miniature moraine between two deep ruts.

"Though, of course, it's a mercy the ruts are there," she reflected. "If I keep between them I can't go *off* the path."

She could accomplish a good deal *on* the path, however, as she very soon found to her cost. She could stumble badly, she could plunge over her shoes in water, she could slip on stones, she could all but sprain her ankle. The one thing she could not do, though, that was what she wanted to do most, was to go more than moderately fast.

"Nevertheless, if you keep going you are bound to get there sometime," she reminded herself, and, as Betsy Peyterson would have said, this was a comfort to her.

She kept going for this reason and for another also. She did not want to stop going in the Cuttin'. It had been very different stopping on the pavement, of Rathness. Lonely they had often been o' nights when she went through them,

but never without the sense of human companionship, never without lots of people just through the stone walls. But the Cuttin' was another matter. It was not the unseen beasts she feared. On the contrary, the sleeping birds and squirrels were a consolation to her. It was the wood itself that scared her, though it was doubtless just such a wood as those she had seen from the train and in which she had longed to wander. It was the trees she hated, hemming her in on either side, looming over her, whispering, rustling, an alert company of inhuman presences. She tried to think of other things, the war, her nephews, Ascher, Mrs. Forgan even, but the trees would none of it, and had brought her to the pass of imagining them leering at her with Rackham faces when, to her intense relief, she came upon a sign-post.

It was painted white and was standing close beside the path. Hardly had she greeted it, however, than she became aware that along with it she was confronted with a new difficulty.

The porter had said nothing of this. He had said that the Cuttin' went straight through.

"Liar or fool!" ejaculated Mrs. Abercrombie, for no less than three roads disparted here at different angles.

And, do what she would, she could not read the sign-post.

She was still trying to do so, however, being unwilling as usual to acknowledge defeat, when interruption came in the shape of Peter Dunwiddie. Noiseless because of his rubber soles, and lightless because of his fear of betraying himself, hurrying down his bypath in the dusk, he was not even aware that he was near the sign-post. Much less was he aware that he was near Mrs. Abercrombie, until, to his consternation as well as hers, they suddenly and violently collided.

Peter, breathless anyhow, had not even time for an ejaculation before his quarry, with the bag in her right hand, had dealt him a staggering blow on the left shoulder, and a whack with her umbrella on the right.

"Ah, would you?" she said fiercely. "Don't try that again, sir!"

Peter indeed had no desire to try it again, but, scared and winded as he was, he had yet his dignity to keep up.

"I would give you the same advice, ye miscreant!" he panted, with the accent on the second syllable.

"A-a-ah!" retorted Mrs. Abercrombie, "so you call names too do you? Are you aware to whom you are speaking?"

"Ay, I am aware," he said recklessly. "Ye're a damned reptile o' a German!"

As he spoke he stood ready with his arms up fully expecting another attack. No attack came, however. There was silence for a few seconds. Then—

"And what makes you think that, my man?" said Mrs. Abercrombie quietly.

"I was warned o' yer comin'," said Peter boldly. "I am the Chief Special Constable o' Wood End, and I would have ye know it."

"And I," said Mrs. Abercrombie, "am Mrs. Abercrombie of 3 Canmore Place, Rathness, in Eastshire, and I would have *you* know it."

Here again there was a few moments' silence. Then Peter spoke.

"Ye're never the Mrs. Abercrombie that Mrs. Binnie's expec'in' at the Doo-cote the nicht?" he said slowly.

And for whose benefit I sold a pot of bramble jam and sundry other luxuries this very morning, he might have added.

"I am," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "I missed the station and got out at Longshaws, and mean to walk on presently to Wood End, if you will tell me which is the road to it."

"I beg your pardon, then, M'm," said the Special Constable.

"No, it is I who should beg yours," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "You were only doing your duty."

"I'm glad ye see that, M'm," said Peter, much relieved. "It's nae joke to be the only Special left in Wood End

to attend to messages an' watch oot here an' watch oot there."

"I hope I did not hurt you much," said Mrs. Abercrombie earnestly.

"Oh, no' to speak o'," said Peter gallantly, though he was still rubbing his shoulder in the darkness.

"Because," said Mrs. Abercrombie, kindling to her subject as usual, despite place and time, "I am in complete sympathy with you. I belong to the British Empire Union —I am president of a branch of it indeed—which undertakes to do all it can to hunt the alien from our midst."

"Well, M'm," said Peter, "that's good news for Wood End. It was jist a leddy like you we was wantin'. And if you'll help, M'm, I'll be very thankful."

"Certainly I will," said Mrs. Abercrombie from sheer habit. But the moment after she had spoken she remembered the terms of her oath. "Ah, no!" she corrected herself hastily. "I am sorry I can't undertake anything—regularly. But you'll come and talk to me about it, won't you? Indeed you can tell me about it now, as we go along."

"This way then, M'm," said Mr. Dunwiddie, and he was preceding her to the left with his best counter manner, when suddenly he stopped short.

"Lord bless us, wha's this next?" he exclaimed, flashing on his torch.

A figure in a long light coat had suddenly appeared coming down the road towards them.

"Hullo!" cried Mrs. Abercrombie delightedly. "It's my friend, Mr. Ascher. Mr. Ascher—this is my friend the Chief Special Constable of Wood End."

"Very pleased I am sure," said Mr. Dunwiddie genteelly.

"Good evening," said Ascher, laughing, as he raised his hat. "All's well that ends well, Mrs. Abercrombie. The man who was meeting you at Wood End station, which is a long way from the village, found me telephoning to Longshaws, and when we found you had started from there we just came off straight to meet you. He refused to come all

the way, and he said he was quite sure you had broken your leg, because the road you were attempting to come by was fit neither for man nor beast in the dark, but he's just round the corner there with his dog-cart."

"Thank God!" said Mrs. Abercrombie.

CHAPTER IV

IN WHICH MRS. ABERCROMBIE INADVERTENTLY PLAYS THE PART OF AN INTERVENTION OF PROVIDENCE, AND MR. JAMES CARRUTHERS BELIEVES HIMSELF TO BE THE VICTIM OF HALLUCINATION

MEANTIME, in the shining, spotless kitchen of the Dovecote, South, at Wood End, Mrs. Ellen Binnie and her niece, Young Ellen, were seated awaiting Mrs. Abercrombie's arrival.

Everything that could be done for her, before she came, had been done. Upstairs in the particler nice sitting-room a fire crackled, and a lamp stood ready lighted. The shutters were shut, the green curtains were drawn. The round table, adorned by a jugful of late roses, was laid for supper, and, in the room across the passage, the bed was furnished with a hot bottle.

Nor had Mrs. Abercrombie's material wants only been anticipated. Mr. Carruthers, on being questioned in haste as to her likes and dislikes, had only been able to say that she was fond of music. The pride of the house therefore, a battered Schiedmayer boudoir grand, stood displaying its yellow keys in a long grin of welcome, with the first piece of the music-seller's repertoire which Young Ellen could lay hands on, and which happened to be Schmitt's five-finger exercises, set enticingly upon it. Besides these completed dispositions upstairs, there were also others downstairs of an incomplete nature. Bacon and eggs ready for frying were on the table, near Mrs. Binnie's capable elbow. A pan was in attendance, a kettle was steaming, and slices of bread were marshalled ready for toasting.

Mrs. Binnie's own person too was in a high state of preparation. Her smooth, dark hair, that showed no sign of grey, although she was already in her sixties, was so oiled and glossy that the lamplight was reflected in it. Her round, rosy, weather-beaten face looked, in spite of wrinkles, as though it had been polished with chamois leather. She wore no cap, but she had put on the black dress and white apron, collar and cuffs, which she wore when officiating at public functions. For Mrs. Ellen Binnie, though at this moment of description she was sitting with her arms folded, doing absolutely nothing, was no spent force to be left out of reckonings, as Wood End well knew, but was on the contrary its most remarkable woman.

She was in fact, though like other experts she did not allow any effort to become apparent, a really great manager, and even in repose, as she sat there, massive yet sinewy as a man, she looked what she was, a very Napoleon among housekeepers. Not one to miss her opportunities was Mrs. Ellen Binnie, and the war-time at Wood End had been to her a succession of opportunities. When others had gone off to munitions or field-work she had been ready to occupy till they came. No less than five separate houses now afforded her a field for her energy, which seemed as insatiable as her desire to amass wealth. She was due at the Established Church manse on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays; at the Free Church manse on Tuesdays; at the Doctor's on Thursdays, and at old Miser Lindsay's—Bob Lindsay's uncle's—at Broadlees farmhouse, on Saturdays. When and how she managed to run her own house, popularly called the Doo-cote, for lodgers, she best knew herself, and her niece, Young Ellen, who in appearance and everything else, looked and was a fairly new edition of her aunt.

Only fairly, certainly, for, as Mrs. M'Kendrick had said, Young Ellen, already in her thirties, was only young comparatively. In spite of hard work, however, and a more wearing because a more nervous energy than her aunt's, she

had retained that fine bloom and lithe grace which comes from health and constant exercise.

She was, however, neither so impressive nor so good-looking as her aunt. There was no grandeur about Young Ellen. Her face, with its frame of smooth, dark hair, its round black eyes, and its very pink cheeks, reminded one rather of a Dutch doll's than of Napoleon's. It expressed her nature, however, which, in anyone so open and above-board as Young Ellen, was the best thing it could have done for her. It was meek rather than commanding, and had always a slightly startled air, not because of life's experience, but because of the raised eyebrows it had been born with. Nevertheless those eyebrows served very well to express the constant mild surprise with which Young Ellen's world in general inspired her, and were, besides, a silent protest when everything else about her was adjusting itself to do the bidding of her aunt.

Young Ellen was in blacks too, and white-collared, cuffed and aproned. As badge of youth, however, she wore also a small butterfly bow of black ribbon pinned coquettishly to one side upon her glossy top-knot. Moreover, in marked contrast to the majestic repose of Old Ellen, she was knitting feverishly with long bone pins, one of which she held tightly under her arm, and which clicked in the silence like a pair of castanets.

"They're takin' their time," said Mrs. Binnie at last, glancing at the eight-day clock, which stood in a corner opposite to her. "The train should ha' been in lang syne. Are ye certain ye mindit to tell Bob to meet her?"

"Certain," said Young Ellen. "An' he was to tak' the fast horse."

"The ane he tak's when he comes here?" asked Old Ellen with a gleam of humour. "Did ye invite him to supper?" she added after a moment.

"Ay," said Young Ellen, knitting more furiously than ever, while her cheeks became a brighter shade of magenta. "At least," she corrected herself, "he invitit hissel'."

"Oh, he invitit hissel', did he?" said Old Ellen, evidently not ill-pleased. "Then we needna worry. He'll be here as sune as he can."

In lieu of worrying, she fell to considering her niece with an impersonal critical stare, which poor Young Ellen had often found very disconcerting. As her custom had long been, however, she pretended not to notice it, and only went on more strenuously with her knitting.

"Auld Lindsay was speaking to me aboot the weddin' the day," said Old Ellen presently, "when I was up at Broadlees. He thinks it should be at once. Afore Bob gangs back to the front."

Young Ellen looked up, her whole face, as well as her eyebrows, expressing surprise.

"At once?" she exclaimed.

Old Ellen laughed.

"Ay, I thocht ye'd be surprised," she said. "I was surprised mysel'. But the auld man's fair set on it, he wants Bob to be steadied doon he says, an' besides he would like, if onything happened to Bob, to ha' you at Broadlees. He thinks that much o' you for a hoosekeeper, he says. Mind ye, Ellen, that's something frae a man like Broadlees."

Ellen did not answer except by beginning to knit again, but though she had made no demur in words, her appearance was dissentient. So thought Old Ellen, at all events, after she had regarded her for a moment.

"If ye werena wantin' to mairry Bob Lindsay," she said at last, "what for did ye accept him?"

Because you and old Miser Lindsay had made it up between you Ellen might have answered; because Bob himself was young and impetuous and in uniform, and would not take no for an answer; because I was fond of him in my own quiet way before he went away to be a soldier. But she said none of these things. All she said was, "Oh, I'll mairry him." But she did not say it enthusiastically.

Mrs. Binnie sat looking at her in silence for a little longer, with tight mouth, with bent brows. Then—

"Ellen," she said, "pit doon yer knittin' an' look at me. What's wrang between you an' Bob? I thocht ye likit him."

"I do like him, Auntie," said Ellen obeying, and dropping her castanets in her lap.

"Then is it him that's no' fond o' you?"

Young Ellen smiled.

"Oh, no," she said.

"What is't then?" said Old Ellen. "Speak oot noo, or never speak again."

"I'll speak then," said Young Ellen, her doll-cheeks becoming pinker and pinker. "It's that he's no' the same since he cam' back frae killin' Germans. I thocht it was a fairmer I was gaun tae mairry—a man like mysel' that had lived a' his life among quiet places an' quiet ways. But it's no' fairmer I'm mairryin' noo. Afore the war he would hear reason. Ye could explain things to him. Noo he jist says he'll jab folks wi' bayonets."

"Jab folks wi' bayonets?" exclaimed Old Ellen, horrified.

"What folk was he gaun tae jab?"

Ellen fumbled with her knitting again, and had dropped two stitches before she replied very low—

"Mr. Dunwiddie, Auntie."

"Mr. Dunwiddie," cried Mrs. Binnie, turning in her chair in her astonishment. "What mak's him say that, lassie?"

Ellen fumbled again.

"Speak oot," commanded her aunt.

"He heard that Mr. Dunwiddie wantit to mairry me," said Young Ellen.

"To mairry *you?*" exclaimed her aunt. "Peter Dunwiddie, that's very near as auld as me, wantin' to mairry *you?* Hoo did he ever hear that?"

"I dinna ken," said Ellen.

"Wha ever said sic nonsense?" cried Mrs. Binnie, appealing to the kitchen at large.

"Mr. Dunwiddie hissel' for ane," said Young Ellen unexpectedly.

"*Never!*" cried Mrs. Binnie.

"But he did," persisted Young Ellen.

"Hoo do you ken?" demanded her aunt.

"Because," said Young Ellen, her round eyes fixed, as though fascinated, upon her questioner, "it was to me he said it."

What her aunt would have replied to this, if she had been able to recover her speech in time, will never be known. For just at this moment there came a loud knocking or rather hammering at the outer door.

"There they are," exclaimed Mrs. Binnie as she hastened forth to meet the new-comers, and Young Ellen, flinging aside her knitting, seized the frying-pan in anticipation. The arrival outside seemed to hang fire, however. After the outer door was opened there was a moment's silence. Then—

"What's this noo?" Ellen heard her aunt ask not very graciously, and she laid down the frying-pan again. The visitor, whoever it was, was evidently not the one expected. Then after another moment of silence—

"Dash Forgan!" she heard her aunt exclaim.

"Jist him," came a surly voice.

"Well I *am* surprised!" cried Mrs. Binnie.

"Ye may weel be," said the man, "an' some ither folk'll be surprised afore mornin'."

There was yet another moment's pause apparently, while Mrs. Binnie tried to take this in.

"I dinna ken what ye mean," she said then. "But come awa' ben an' let's see ye."

"I'm no' very bonny to look at," said Dash.

He was not. His khaki uniform was splashed with fresh mud from head to foot. His boots were a sight. Even his good-looking face was smeared as though it had been wiped with a muddy sleeve. It was darkened as well by a heavy frown.

"Bless me, Dash!" was all Mrs. Binnie found power to ejaculate, "whaur ever ha' ye been to get yersel' into sic a mess?"

"Whaur d'ye think?" exclaimed Dash hoarsely. "I've been *hame,* that's whaur I've been."

He emphasised the word "hame" by banging his fist on the table.

"I've been hame," he went on, "come on leave from France, oot o' the jaws o' death—an' I arrive at Cock-malone to find the door shut an' the hoose dark, an' the wife an' bairns that I expec'it to gi'e a surprise—whaur d'ye think? Awa' wi' a strange man to see the Picters at Cairncross."

At this there was a loud exclamation from both Ellens.

"Ay!" Dash Forgan went on, his fury becoming hotter, apparently, the more he put it into words. "Ay, auld Tammas the byreman at Broadlees telled me—I met him on the road an' he said he'd seen them awa' to the station in the mornin'. Ay, that's the way Mimy cairries on when her man's in the fore-front o' the fecht, exposin' hissel' for her —but *I'll* show her! *I'll* teach her!——"

"An' d'ye mean to tell me, Dash," said Mrs. Binnie, "that auld Tammas tauld ye that Mimy an' her seeven bairns was awa' to the station wi' a strange man?"

"Na, he was ower canny," returned Dash. "He didna tell me—though he knew well enough, the auld deevil, for I mind noo he was lauchin'. It was Donald the porter that tell't me—I met him next—he was comin' bikin' frae the station efter the evening train was in, an' he said he had seen Mimy an' a' the bairns at the station, but that I needna hurry for a strange man was lookin' efter them."

"God help's!" exclaimed Mrs. Binnie, and Young Ellen stood open-mouthed. Then all of a sudden she recovered herself.

"There's some daft-like mistake, Dash," she said. "I dinna believe't o' Mimy."

"Nor me," agreed Old Ellen.

"Believe't or no' as ye like," said Dash; "but as for mistak's there'll be nae mistak' when I gang back the nicht——"

"Weel, weel," said Mrs. Binnie soothingly, "I'm glad ye had the sense onyway to come here, Dash."

"Ay," said the man wearily, smearing his face with his sleeve once more. "I thocht ye micht tak' me in for the sake o' the auld days, an' ye're cousins as weel, an' ye'll keep the thing quiet. Besides Mimy can never hear tell o' you, Young Ellen, she's that jealous. That's mainly why I cam'."

"Weel, weel," said Mrs. Binnie again, "never mind aboot that noo. Ye're that tired an' hungry ye dinna ken what ye're sayin'. Awa' ben the scullery there an gi'e yersel' a wash doon an' by the time ye come back there'll be supper for ye an' efter supper we can ha' a crack aboot it."

"Is there onything besides the bacon an' eggs? Onything *ready?*" she added hastily to Young Ellen when she returned from lighting a candle for the visitor in the scullery.

"I was jist thinkin'," said Young Ellen, wrinkling those eyebrows of hers. "An' there's naething ready but Mr. Carruthers's pie. He'll maybe no' ha' eaten ony o't yet."

"When did ye see it last?" said Mrs. Binnie.

"At tea-time," said Young Ellen. "But I drew his attention an' mindit him aboot it. An' he said 'Very well, I will.' "

"Still, there's a chance," said Mrs. Binnie. "Lord's sake! It's an awfu' like thing to dae, but it may prevent murder bein' done this nicht. Rin' an' see if ye can get it."

. . . . . .

Neither Mrs. Abercrombie nor Ascher could understand why Mr. Dunwiddie would not accompany them in the dog-cart. They assured him that there was plenty of room for him, and he knew, as well as they did and better, what a

long rough road he had still to traverse. Nothing, however, would induce him to get in.

"Is he afraid of driving?" said Mrs. Abercrombie, after they had started, to Bob Lindsay, who had sat very big and erect and silent during the argument.

"So it seems," said Bob, and Mrs. Abercrombie for a moment imagined, though afterwards she believed she must have been mistaken, that he chuckled.

There was no mistake, however, about the noise at the Dove-cote when, after, at his desire, dropping Ascher at Mr. Carruthers's end, they went on to what Bob called Mrs. Binnie's.

The door stood open, and from within there came a confused sound of what seemed to be arguing.

"The Doves seem not to be on very good terms," said Mrs. Abercrombie to herself, as she held the reins while her driver got down to announce her arrival, for the inmates could not have heard it.

"Are ye there, Mrs. Binnie?" he shouted in at the doorway.

Instantaneous silence followed, and a moment after Mrs. Binnie made her appearance upon the doorstep, full of apologies and welcomes.

"You have other lodgers, besides Mr. Carruthers, I hear," said Mrs. Abercrombie, as she followed her landlady up the narrow stair.

"No, M'm," said Mrs. Binnie, who was rather more breathless and red in the face than usual. "That was jist a visitor, M'm—a cousin o' mine—Dash Forgan—jist back from France, M'm. He's a transport-driver."

Mrs. Binnie here looked back in surprise, for Mrs. Abercrombie had come to a standstill on the stair.

"Did I hear you say," she asked, "that your cousin, *Dash Forgan,* was in the kitchen?"

"Yes, M'm, from the front," said Mrs. Binnie. "That's why we was makin' such a noise when ye cam' in. He is—a little excited, M'm."

Mrs. Binnie made as though she would move on again, being anxious to transfer Mrs. Abercrombie to her own rooms before Dash should, as he inevitably would, she was sure, break out again.

As a matter of fact he had already begun, though, in deference to Young Ellen's urgent commands that he should hold his tongue till the lady was upstairs, he was speaking in a subdued voice. This, however, only seemed to express his concentrating fury more. He was, as the terrified Ellen said afterwards, like a kettle that gets quieter-like jist as it's comin' to the boil.

"It's nae use," he was saying. "I'll ha' it oot wi' Mimy, an' I dinna care wha hears me. No, I'll no' stay here the nicht. An' you an' yer auntie needna think ye can interfere between man an' wife, though ye have given me a guid supper—that gi'es ye nae power over me."

"Dash Forgan!" exclaimed Young Ellen indignantly.

"Ay, an' ye thocht ye would come roond me, did ye?" he went on. "Stovin' me up wi' supper an' soft talk, an' thinkin' ye would save Mimy from what she richly deserves—but she'll get it this nicht an' get it proper—if I ha' to swing for it—an' neither You nor yet yer Auntie nor yet yer *Pie* will hinder me!"

Outside on the stairs, Mrs. Binnie by this time was aware that another outburst was imminent, but, do what she would, she could not move her new boarder one step further towards her apartments. To Mrs. Abercrombie Dash only sounded as a crescendo murmur still quite inarticulate, but, all the more, the sound stimulated her curiosity and her interest.

"A man from the front?" she exclaimed, "and a transport-driver? and named Dash Forgan? What a delightful coincidence! Do you know, Mrs. Binnie, I met his wife and family in the train this very afternoon. You really must allow me to make his acquaintance."

"Oh, M'm, are you not too tired?" said Mrs. Binnie hastily.

But Mrs. Abercrombie was already going down the stair again.

"I am never too tired to shake hands with a soldier from the front," she said, and, sure enough in a minute's time, she was shaking hands with the astonished Dash.

"I hear you are the husband of a charming woman I met this afternoon," said Mrs. Abercrombie, beaming, "and the father of seven of the finest children I have ever had the pleasure of seeing. Your eldest son is one to be proud of I am sure. He looked after them all like a man in your absence. What a delightful ending to their day of pleasuring to have you home again!"

"Yes, M'm," said Dash mechanically, as she paused for a reply, for Mrs. Abercrombie with her geniality and her distinction had, as he said afterwards, fairly bombed the wits out of him.

"The first day away, your wife told me, she had had for many years," Mrs. Abercrombie went on. "Really, it is refreshing to come across such devotion. For a pretty woman like that, and she is indeed delightfully pretty, and so young-looking, too, to be the mother of seven—for a pretty woman to bury herself for nine years in the depths of the country for your sake; you may well be proud of her—you may well go and fight for her and your seven delightful children. I can tell you, my friend and I were quite sorry to part with them. My friend, Mr. Ascher, was as interested as I was—and, by the way, he should be your friend too, for he saw your family safely to their perambulator."

Dash's eyes grew suddenly rather wild.

"*Your* friend Mr. Ascher?" he exclaimed. "Was it *him?*"

"Had you heard of it?" said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Yes, I call him a brick, don't you? It's not every young man that would be seen on a railway-platform herding babies, but he did it to oblige me, as it was so dark, and there were such a lot of them, poor dears."

"Well I never," began Dash, turning scarlet and then white, while the two Ellens in the background nearly collapsed from sheer relief. But Mrs. Abercrombie gave him no chance of saying more.

"So you are on your way home?" she went on immediately. "And where have you come from? Have you been in the Great Advance?"

"Yes, M'm," said Dash, recovering himself proudly, "from jist behind Cambrai"—he pronounced it like Cambridge. "It's been a great move forward, M'm—it's been great."

"Ah, you are in the transport, are you not?" said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Your wife told me—a dangerous job—a very dangerous job I have always heard—but your wife told me you were a great fighter too, though you are supposed not to fight. If a German countered you, she would not be sure of you, she said."

At this Dash grinned suddenly from ear to ear, and his grin seemed to spread also over the faces of the two Ellens.

"Did she say that?" he said.

"She did indeed," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "But now I have a crow to pick with you. You are going home without notice, for she knew nothing of it when I saw her. How she would have rejoiced! For she has missed you more than she could tell me, so much so that, in sheer desperation, she had to go to the Pictures. You are going home without notice. Now that's a bad thing. It might lead to all sorts of bother."

"I don't see——" began Dash.

"No, of course you don't," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "But I do, for just that same thing happened to me. Two nephews of mine—one a D.S.O. and both from the front—arrived one night about a fortnight ago at my house and found it dark and the door shut."

"Never!" exclaimed Dash.

"They did," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Now I ask you what about supper?"

"I've had mine here," said Dash, reddening again. "I—I thought it would save trouble."

"My nephews did better," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "They got in supper both for themselves and me. They had quite a little feast ready for me when I came back. Now I once had an old aunt who, when she did anyone a kindness, said, 'Don't thank me—but pass it on.' May I pass on my nephews' kindness to you, Mr. Forgan? I will do it gladly, in the name of all the soldiers belonging to me at the front, and because of the real pleasure it was to me to-day to meet that charming wife and family of yours. Mrs. Binnie," she added, turning to her landlady, "how can we manage it? There is a provision-merchant somewhere in Wood End I'm sure."

"Ay, but he's away, M'm," said Mrs. Binnie rather discouragingly. "For it riled me," she said afterwards to Young Ellen, "to see Dash Forgan gettin' the present o' anither supper, an' him wi' Mr. Carruthers's pie, that I had taken sic a trouble wi', hardly five meenits doon his throat."

"Ye see, M'm," she added, however, feeling that her tone had been rather ungracious, "it's the shop holiday the day an' the grocer's no' at the shop."

"Oh, but surely he will be somewhere about," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Could he not be found?"

"I'm afraid no' the nicht, M'm," said Mrs. Binnie. "Ye never ken whaur he may be—ye see he's the Chief Special Constable o' Wood End and——"

Here she was unexpectedly interrupted by an exclamation of delight from her boarder.

"The Chief Special Constable?" cried Mrs. Abercrombie. "Then I *know* him! He is a friend of mine! How very fortunate! Also I know where he is. He will be at Wood End quite soon. Will somebody be so good as to keep

watch for him, while I sit down here, and have a chat with Mrs. Forgan's husband?"

It fell to the lot of Bob Lindsay, who had just returned from putting up the horse, to keep watch for Mr. Dunwiddie. Nothing, however, would have induced him to do it but the knowledge that, if he declined, Young Ellen would be the watcher.

Mr. Dunwiddie, when he came plodding into the oblong of light shed by the open door of the Dove-cote, was startled to see Bob's big figure standing by it.

"Ye're to come in," said Bob shortly. "I was sent here to tell ye, or weel ye ken I wouldna sae much as look at ye."

"What am I to come in for?" said Mr. Dunwiddie, resenting, as well he might, the tone Bob was taking with him. "I'm no' wantin' to come in."

"Please yersel'," said Bob, turning his back on the road and on his rival at the same time and swinging into the house again.

But Mr. Dunwiddie followed closely on his heels, as Bob saw with a scowl, when he turned once more. His rival, however, had come to a standstill on the threshold, thunderstruck at the prospect which was presented to him.

The two Ellens were waiting about in a semi-paralysed state apparently until Mrs. Abercrombie should again have need of them. Mrs. Abercrombie, however, appeared for the time being to have totally forgotten every one but Dash.

They sat side by side at the table, he talking and she listening, and their heads were bent together over a little torn field-map which lay spread out between them.

"La Bassée," he was saying as Dunwiddie came in. "Eh, that was the graund place, where the estaminet was"—he pronounced it estaminette—"an' the Vinn Roodge, an' the tile hats. Eh, that was the rare divert!"

"Tell me about it," said Mrs. Abercrombie.

"The toon'sfolk, puir craters," said Dash, "when they

had to leave in a hurry didna mind to tak' everything, an' there was a heap o' tile hats left. Sae some o' the chaps pit them on—it was enough tae mak' a cat lauch—an' sat in the middle o' the street drinkin' each ither's healths in Vinn Roodge. Eh, M'm, I wish ye'd seen't!"

"I wish I had!" exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie.

Then looking up she became aware of the latest arrival standing petrified in the doorway.

"Ah, Mr. Dunwiddie," she said, rising. "How good of you to come in! Come and consult, and let me see if you are as good at being a provider as you are at being a special constable."

. . . . . .

Ascher, meanwhile, having been left by his protectress at the door of Mr. Carruthers's end, stood knocking there in vain until it occurred to him that, if his former preceptor were its only occupant, he might remain till Doomsday without response. He therefore tried the door, found it on the latch, and entered. Then, with a lantern which he found on the hall table, he looked through the downstairs rooms, and finding them empty, made his way upstairs. For any sound or sign of life, all here too might have been emptiness. Presently, however, turning a corner in the passage he saw a streak of light emerging from under a door facing him.

Going forward, therefore, he tapped at it twice, and again failing to obtain an answer, opened it, when, with a strange medley of feeling, he saw a familiar narrow back and rumpled, grizzled head bent over a desk just opposite. A hanging lamp above it illumined the desk, and the books that were heaped upon it. Materials for a meal stood on a table near. A fire languished in the grate. A kettle sang faintly.

More books were piled on the floor in places, but everything else in the room, that it had been possible to clear out, had been cleared. Not a picture broke the flowery

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lines of a feebly ugly wall-paper. There was only one chair, and there were no adornments.

Suddenly, as Ascher stood gazing, the man at the desk turned round. Either the draught from the door or something more occult had disturbed him. He removed his spectacles, and his peering eyes met Ascher's, then he put on a pair of eye-glasses that hung round his neck by a string, and stared long and hard at him.

"Ascher?" he said at last, almost in a whisper. "Is it possible?"

He rose slowly and stiffly, as though it had been long since he had moved, and keeping his eyes fixed all the time on his visitor. He did not come towards him, however, but stood where he was, leaning one hand on the desk behind him.

"Can you speak?" he said at last, in the same tone and with his eyes still fixed. "Can you tell me where you have come from?"

"I can," said Ascher, coming across the room to him. "I am not a ghost nor a wraith either. I'm sorry, sir, but I'm not. I wish to God I were. Will you still shake hands with me?"

"Why, of course I will," said Mr. Carruthers.

Then, holding Ascher's hand in his, and looking up at the pale, moved face looking down into his.

"Why should I not shake hands?" he added. "I am sure you are still Ascher."

"And I was sure you were still Mr. Carruthers," said Ascher, "or I would never have come. But oh, sir, it has been despicable of me to come like this. Anyone else would think so, I know—the kind woman that brought me here, more than anybody, would think so."

"Let's sit down," said Mr. Carruthers suddenly, "and let me fully understand this. Let's sit close to the fire," and he drew forward his own chair and sat down. As there was no other chair available, Ascher established himself on a

pile of books—very large and solid ones—at one side of the hearth.

"Yes, this is better," said Mr. Carruthers, "for you are very cold. Your hand is very cold. And you must be hungry too," he added, recollecting himself. "You must eat something."

He rose and went over to the tray on the table.

Then a moment passed in silence while he stood looking at it.

"It's a strange thing, Ascher," he said at last. "I could have sworn I had seen a pie here—and I have no recollection of eating it. Yet I must have eaten it, of course."

"Yes—some other day most likely," said Ascher, remembering former incidents of the same nature.

"Yes, it is not even as if the dish were here," said Mr. Carruthers slowly. "So of course it must have been some other day. Yet," he came back to the fireplace, "I could have sworn I saw it, and quite recently. I am afraid, Ascher, that I must be becoming the victim of delusions."

"Never mind it now, sir," said Ascher, who meantime had revived the fire; "I need nothing to eat. I could not eat it if I had it. I have far too much to say. And my time is very short. I have not, of course, come to stay here. I am a fugitive and a wanderer. I must go away again immediately after I have said what I have come here to say—at the cost of a splendid woman's regard—of her wonderful friendship perhaps—of her inspiring goodwill certainly—for when she knows she will utterly despise me."

"You keep talking about a woman," said Mr. Carruthers, sitting down again, and forgetting from that moment all his impulses towards hospitality, so far at least as the tray was concerned. "Begin by telling me what woman you mean."

"Mrs. Abercrombie," said Ascher.

"Ah—a fine woman indeed," said Mr. Carruthers; "without any very great intellect perhaps, but with, what is more useful in a woman, adaptability and appreciation.

She was a friend of my mother's, and though I have seldom seen her since I grew up, she was kind to me as a child. She used to read the tales I wrote then—ghost stories—they must have been very dull. It was very good of her, and I have not forgotten. Mrs. Binnie, by the way, told be this afternoon that she was coming here. My sister had wired, it seems, to that effect."

"She *is* here," said Ascher. "I came with her. I was in her house in Rathness all last night. She has fed and clothed me and warmed my very soul. She has been goodness itself to me."

"That is extremely interesting," said Mr. Carruthers, "and it proves just what I have been saying about Mrs. Abercrombie's character. But even *I* had no idea that she was as appreciative and adaptable as that. I had always understood from my sister that she was rabidly anti-German."

"So she is," said Ascher, very pale. "She would have shut her door in my face if she had known. Yet—perhaps—if she knew all. May I tell you the whole thing, sir? I have come for that and that only. I couldn't die without being sure that *you* at least understood."

"Go on then," said Mr. Carruthers. "But no—stay a moment first. Run down and turn the key in the lock. Otherwise we might be interrupted."

CHAPTER V

IN WHICH SOME ACCOUNT IS GIVEN OF WHAT TOOK PLACE IN MR. CARRUTHERS'S END AFTER THE DOOR WAS LOCKED

"WHICH of my letters did you get last?" said Ascher, when they had settled down at the fire again.

"It was that from just before Verdun," said Mr. Carruthers. "There was terrible fighting going on, and you wrote to say farewell. You had a presentiment that you were about to die."

"Which very nearly was fulfilled," said Ascher. "I was as near death then as I have ever been since, and that is saying something. I was so badly wounded that I was discharged."

"Not in the arms or hands I hope," said Mr. Carruthers, peering down at Ascher's hands as they hung, lightly clasped, before him, his elbows resting on his knees.

"No," said Ascher indifferently, "they thought at first I was going to die, and told me so, for they don't mince matters in Germany—but they were wrong. I was only very lame for a time. My physical wound was nothing to my mental injury. I had a horror of great darkness, sir, which I cannot describe——"

"Don't try to then!" said Mr. Carruthers hastily.

"I'm not going to," said Ascher; "but one thing I must tell you—Do you remember our talk on the cliffs, that last day, when we sat among the gorse, above the sea, in the sunshine?"

"Did you think I would forget, Ascher?" said Mr. Carruthers.

"One knows not what to think now," he replied bit-

terly; "but this will interest you. I was haunted by the incidents of that time, by what you had told me of the great catastrophe, thousands of years ago, involving horror and death and mortal agony that had left no trace. And alternating with that I saw again the little colony of ants I had seen that day, under the whin-bush, under the golden flowers, busy and happy in the sunshine—and I thought that I was one of them, and that some irresponsible power, as I had been myself that day, was sitting laughing, with a boulder in his hand ready-poised . . ."

"Yes, yes," interposed Mr. Carruthers, "but——"

"Let me finish, sir," said Ascher passionately. "Note that the boulder had not yet fallen. Nevertheless, I had fought, sir; I had killed men, I had been in the thick of it, and, though I was afraid, sir, often afraid, I had done my level best——"

"I know you would, Ascher," said Carruthers.

"It was not the memory of the trenches," Ascher went on, and as his excitement increased his voice lowered till it was almost a whisper. "It was not the memory of the struggle, though that was horrible enough, that overshadowed me. As you know I am very strong physically, sir, and I suppose it comes natural for a man to fight. It was an extraordinary sense—I told you I could not describe it of something sinister looming yet ahead, something deeper, darker, more horrible than all the blood and slaughter—something that was yet to come. I can only think it must have been a presentiment."

"Yes, Ascher," said Mr. Carruthers quietly. "But tell me then what you did. There was—you say—nothing in your injuries to prevent your playing?"

"No," said Ascher, calming a little. "No, sir! And God! Didn't I play when I got back to the Lauenhain!"

"You went back there?" said Mr. Carruthers. "You were allowed?"

"Yes, I was good for nothing, I suppose," said Ascher, "and they didn't want weaklings at that time. So they

left me at the Forst-haus, which I had to myself, except for two of the servants—old Johann and his wife—for both my cousins had gone to serve, and my uncle—thank God—was dead."

"Why do you thank God for your uncle's death?" said Mr. Carruthers. "It was to him was it not that you were indebted for your education, even for your time with me at Rathness? Though I must say I never liked him," he added.

"He was a devil," said Ascher fiercely. "He was a mean devil—a type of those who have brought Germany to this pass—actively I mean—all of us have helped passively. I found it out just before the war began, and I was thankful for the war that gave me the chance at least of fighting our enemies honestly, and not according to his despicable plans. Everything I had had from him I found had been given me to an end. He told me so himself when he thought the time was ripe. My training at Rugby and Cambridge even, which has made me unrecognisable as a German, my musical training, which was to give me the excuse for wandering about here, there, and everywhere, pretending to give concerts, and really spying. . . . Pah! He was nauseating and stupid, too. He did not take me—me myself—into his reckoning. He forgot while he was disguising me in the education of an Englishman what that education was. He forgot, too, that I had had a mother, and did not realise that I remembered her teaching better than anything else in all the world. Ah, my mother was a German, sir, but she was out and out a good woman, though she was whole-heartedly loyal to her country, to its old ideals and traditions. Mercifully she died long before the war, and I thank God daily that she has been spared the shame and the disgrace of it."

"Your country's defeat certainly seems imminent," said Mr. Carruthers.

"Defeat!" cried Ascher. "If it were only defeat! Other peoples have suffered defeat, but with more glory than

their conquerors. Their defeat meant only inferiority in force or in material wealth—it was something merely physical—Germany's defeat is more than that."

Mr. Carruthers nodded silently.

"You know it, sir," Ascher went on. "To be loyal now means to be loyal to a country and a people that are doomed to utter damnation, not in a future hell, but here on this earth—and what they have suffered already in death and misery is as nothing to that which awaits them in the world's contempt."

He covered his face with his hands.

"You were telling me about the Lauenhain," said Mr. Carruthers. "Go on from there. I want to hear the whole thing. You were able to play there you say. That must have been a relief."

"Yes, that, and the belief that I had only a short time to live, kept me in a fool's paradise," said Ascher. "My darkness lightened. I dreamed that I had done with the war, that, surging away in either side of me, it never more would come near me. Broken as I was, I yet was able to forget everything while I was playing. And to forget was all I wanted. Old Johann and Marie supplied all my material wants, the forest and my piano, my books and my music supplied the rest. I was almost happy in a queer, groping way. Strange, is it not? Like something half-crushed coming back to life before an avalanche annihilates it."

"Don't be so vivid," said Mr. Carruthers suddenly. "You—you make me feel rather ill. No, no—I don't mean that," he added quickly. "Go on from where you were."

"How long I was at the Lauenhain I cannot be quite sure," Ascher went on. "I was so ill when I first came there, and my way of life made me lose count of time. Tremendous events happening all around me did not affect my quiet existence. The sound of them did not penetrate my forest. I hardly noticed the greater scarcity of food and the anxious faces of my two attendants. I had a

vague ambition now to become a great pianist, a world celebrity as you had prophesied, sir, if I still lived when the war was ended. As you see by this time I had become entirely selfish. The imminence of death had made me so, the urgent need, if I would not go mad, of forgetting what I had suffered, and what others were still suffering. As I always refused to listen, no one ever spoke to me of the war. Even when my cousin Hans, on leave from his regiment, came back for a few days to see how things were going at the Lauenhain, which now belonged partly to him and partly to me, he at first said very little, except that he was surprised to see me looking so well.

"'You will be fit for service again soon,' he said, and I remember that I thought he was joking and laughed. He was grave, however. 'One never knows,' he said then.

"On the last night before he left, however—how well I remember it!—when we were at supper, I asked for my cousin Karl, who was in the Navy, and then, for the first time, I heard of the U-boat horror, of the sinking of the great passenger ships full of women and children, of the hundred and one dastardly and impossible things that had been done on the high seas. . . .

"Oh, you know them all, sir . . . better than I do. . . . The whole world knows them. . . . All I need to tell you is, that that night, as we sat drinking our wine together, and to the accompaniment of my cousin's laughter, I heard them all for the first time. I could not realise it, and the more I protested and stared, the more he laughed.

"'Ach du Martin, du bist zu komisch!' he always repeated.

"Then, as though he enjoyed my horror, and had not yet had enough of it, he told me some of his own adventures—in Belgium—in France. . . .

"Ah, I can see by your face that you know them, too, sir. . . . I see him now at the table in the old dining-room, with the portraits of my mother and of his ancestors and mine, who had been at least *men*, looking down upon

him sitting there red-faced and hilarious. 'These have never been men,' I said to myself, as he told me with gusto and more bursts of laughter of his feats and of those of his companions. 'They have been swine from the beginning, and now devils are entered into them and are rushing them to the abyss.' But I said nothing more aloud. I only rose from the table and left him."

Here there was a long pause as Ascher sat again with his face hidden. There was no sound in the room but his heavy breathing, and the faint crackling of the embers. The kettle had been moved away, and sang no more.

Then suddenly, there came a sound of knocking, insistent, persistent, on the outer door.

Ascher started and looked up.

"It's nothing," said Mr. Carruthers; "it's only Mrs. Binnie or Young Ellen. You turned the key in the lock, I hope?"

"I did," said Ascher.

"Then go on," said Mr. Carruthers. "They'll soon stop." And he settled himself more comfortably in his chair.

"I saw no more of my cousin Hans," Ascher went on. "I kept out of his way, and he left next morning. The things he had said did not leave with him, however. He seemed to have poisoned the very air of the Lauenhain. I could no longer be happy there. All my horror of great darkness had returned upon me, along with a worse and deeper horror of what, in the name of Germany, was now actually going forward. In my time we had been brutes, perhaps—fighting animals for the time being, but we had not been mean and loathsome demons. In comparison with what my cousin Hans had told me, the war, as it had appeared to me, had been a chivalrous and brave thing. We had gone forward together with high courage, shoulder to shoulder, to die for our country if need be, as our brave enemies were ready to die for theirs. It had been a contest of courage. Our men had fought like warriors against foes worthy of them—not against unequal odds—not

against—oh, the humiliation of it!—women and children. We had played the game. We had not been bounders and outsiders. But now——

"The forest had become haunted, even the room where my piano was. Through my Chopin and Schumann I seemed to hear the shrieks of helpless victims, the cries of drowning mothers. In the night sometimes I felt as though I were going really mad at last. Old Johann and Marie thought so, too, I think. I could hear them lurking about, watching me, and this last it was, that drove me from the Lauenhain. One day I insisted upon putting on my uniform again. Nothing, I was quite certain, could be so bad as waiting there in the dark. I read the papers eagerly now, but there was nothing in them but boasts of victories and speeches from a Kaiser who made himself and God ridiculous. . . . I felt I must see clearly—must know for certain whether what my cousin had said were true; must know how those victories were being won. I read at least that the U-boat stories were true. . . . I think I must have been half delirious when I left the Lauenhain. How I managed it I cannot tell you, and I would have managed nothing, I believe, had it not been for Karl Krause, an old comrade whom I met by chance. He thought at first that I was a ghost—he had thought I was dead long ago, he said—but when I told him what I wanted to do, he thought, like Johann and Marie, that I was mad.

"'Go back to the fighting line?' he exclaimed. 'Great God, you cannot know what you ask!'

"'I do,' I said, 'and I know, too, that anything is better than being shut out of everything, when my honour is at stake.'

"'Your honour,' he laughed, and his laughter reminded me of my cousin Hans. 'I suppose you mean your country's honour.'

"'No, mine,' I said. 'For it is bound up with that.'

"'Well, if you will have it,' he answered, 'it can be

managed. In fact I am on the look-out for an odd man like you.'

"'Manage then,' I said.

"I thought he would have difficulty, but, now I know why—I was soon told I could have my desire."

Here Ascher paused again, and for so long that Mr. Carruthers looked away from the fire, into which he had been gazing, and glanced furtively at his companion's face.

It was ghastly pale, the mouth was open, the eyes fixed as though upon some dreadful vision.

"Tell me no more," said Mr. Carruthers suddenly.

"I must," said Ascher hoarsely. "I must finish to-night, for to-morrow I must be gone again. When they come knocking again they must be answered. I must finish, but I cannot tell you all I would wish—with all the details as you used to like me to tell you things—for though I was conscious of all of them at the time, some I do not now remember, and some are too horrible to tell. All I can say is that I arrived in a great city, and was taken to a great house and through a beautiful entrance hall down a stair, to what I now think of as an ante-chamber of hell. A jangling of bells was there—I heard some one say they were ship's bells, though I did not then realise that they were the bells of sunken ships. . . . There was a blaze of light and a pandemonium of singing and laughter. Some one thrust a great beaker of wine into my hand—'Drink,' he shouted, 'for you may be dead soon, and you will be long dead.' I drank mechanically, for I had had no food that day, and a sudden feeling of deathly faintness terrified me. I feared to fall unconscious in that place. I drank again and again, and the wine, I suppose, must have gone to my head, for the next thing I remember was the chill of the open air, and finding myself going down a sloping gangway, supported on either side by a sailor.

"'Where are you taking me to?' I said, for, up to that moment, my destination had been hidden from me.

"'Na—don't you know?' said the sailor on my right.

'Do you hear that, Fritz?' he added to his companion on my other side. 'Here is one—an officer too—that doesn't know where he is going.'

"'Pst!' returned the other. 'He needn't know yet, either. The Krause has other fish to fry to-night, and has sent him as a substitute.'

"'Du lieber Gott!' exclaimed the other. 'No wonder so few of us come back!'

"'Pst!' said the other again. 'Hold you your tongue, comrade.'

"At this, however, I stopped short. Not from fear, sir. Not from fear of death at least—but of something worse.

"'Tell me where I am going,' I said, 'or I refuse to move another step.'

"'Certainly, my officer,' sneered the man on my left. 'I have the honour to be ushering your highness into U-boat Number —.'

"I have forgotten the number.

"I was determined not to faint. I hit out as hard as I could. I lay down. They had to drag me along. I resisted with all my might. If I had had a revolver I would have killed myself, but, half drunk as I was, what could I do against two stalwart sailormen?

"'It's all no use, sir,' was the last thing I heard one say —the one on the right. 'You should have found out where you were going in better time. Now it is too late.'

"Whether I had received a blow on the head in the scuffle, or whether it was only the wine I cannot tell, but, judging by the distance we had gone when I recovered, I must have been unconscious for a very long time. When I awoke the same sailor, who had spoken last to me, was bending over me in the dim light. His face was not unkindly. His words were not unkindly either. He spoke in a hoarse whisper. "'Lie still as you are, comrade,' he said. 'They think you are at the point of death.'

"They were not far wrong it seemed to me just then, though, as I afterwards found, it was I who was wrong.

It seems to be going to be hard for me to die. I am grateful to that sailor. He was, in spite of everything, not a bad sort. He had at least some spark of decency and pity left. I believe I owe my life to him. He had evidently been put in charge of me, as he came to look at me from time to time, and had he been like his fellows he would probably have thrown me overboard. For I was absolutely useless, I saw nothing, heard nothing most of the time. I lay with closed eyes and throbbing head, and the more conscious I became of what had happened to me, the more I longed for death. But my sailorman refused to grant my prayers that he should kill me.

"'No, no, comrade,' he said, 'when we get in again you will be released. Have patience. It will not be long. We are already on our way back.'

"'Where are we?' I said.

"I cannot think what made me ask it, for, God knows, I had no interest in the answer. I think it must have been to keep the man by me for a moment longer. His company at least was better than my dreadful thoughts.

"'Near the mouth of the Forth,' he said indifferently, 'in the Bay of Rathness.'

"He said it, sir, as he might have said Hudson's Bay or any other remote place. But you will know how I felt.

"'We are close in-shore,' he added, 'but soon we will be out again in the open sea. Then it will not be long.'

"With this he left me.

"I hardly noticed that he had gone, however. The thought of being so near Rathness, Rathness where I had spent the happiest time of my life, where we had walked and talked, and read and made music together. . . . Rathness, where old Sandy's cottage was, with its kindly welcomes, old Sandy himself, his dear old wife, the cheery sons and daughters, the old yawl—the 'Petronella'—of which I had been made the mate. . . . This last, I think, was the worst of all. Here was I now under the very place where I had voyaged so often in the old days, skulking

literally in the depths, an outcast for ever from all I had known then.

"A great longing for the impossible came upon me—I longed to see old Sandy and them all once more, though I could not hope that I would be able to explain things to them, or ever be to them again what I had been. . . . But most of all, sir, I longed to see you—not only because of the old days, but because of my present distress. The more I thought of you, the more the longing grew. You seemed to me the one ray of light in the gross darkness that surrounded me, the one way of escape from the great barrier of condemnation which was enclosing me. I remembered our talks by the fireside, by the sea-shore. I remembered what you had said, when I little thought how and where I would remember it, of cause and effect, of the motives of men—of environment, of fate, of the influences of the unseen. You had not spoken as one belonging to any nationality. You had spoken as a human being, as one to whom all things of the body were unessential, as a mind capable of penetrating to the very heart of things. I realised that you were the one man to whom I could go, sir, who would listen to me as you are doing now, who could help me, and as I lay in the depths, literally as well as figuratively, I longed for you, sir, as I have never longed for anything."

Mr. Carruthers held up his hand for silence.

"That is interesting, Ascher," he said. "When was this?"

"Only yesterday, sir," said Ascher. "It must have been yesterday morning."

"Yes," said Mr. Carruthers. "I had a very strong impression of you then—suddenly—for no reason that I could think of—for, I must frankly confess, Ascher, of late I had forgotten you—practically forgotten you, at least, my mind being much occupied with other things."

"I understand that, sir," said Ascher. "Had I not prac-

tically forgotten you? But the mention of Rathness brought the whole thing back to me."

"Just as my impression—I cannot call it so much as a vision," replied Mr. Carruthers, "recalled the whole thing to me, and prepared me for your arrival. When I turned round and saw you there a while ago, it seemed—though curious—quite natural. I thought of course, however, that you were—er—out of the body. For the moment's reflection you allowed me convinced me that it was impossible that you could be there otherwise. For, in that case you would have had to come either as a spy or a deserter, and I could not imagine you in either character."

"I knew I was right to come here!" Ascher burst out. "I thank you, sir, I thank you a hundred times!"

"You have not yet told me, however," said Mr. Carruthers, "how you come to be here. The hiatus between the interior of a U-boat and that of Mrs. Abercrombie's drawing-room is a wide one."

"I can't tell you properly myself," said Ascher. "All I know is that even as I was thinking of you with an intensity that almost amounted to madness because of the despair of attainment that was mingled with it, the end came, the end of the U-boat I mean, though how or why it came just then I shall never know. How or why I escaped with my miserable life I do not know either. My friend the sailor may have helped, for the last thing I remember is his lifting me in his arms. I never saw him again alive. He was beside me, however, when, after the fearful crash and blindness and deafness and suffocation, I came to again and found myself once more under the open heaven lying on my side, and more dead than alive, among the seaweed on the Rathness rocks. . . . We had been washed up together into a little secret cove, and left there by the tide. He was lying very close to me, bruised and battered almost beyond recognition, and, because I could not help looking at him where I lay, he was the cause of my first efforts to move myself. I am glad that I had enough

sense of gratitude remaining in me to make me make sure that he was really dead before I left him.

"For myself, though I was bruised and sore and exhausted to a degree, I was, as you see, intact, and after a day spent in dragging myself across from rock to rock, with long intervals of sleep or unconsciousness, I don't know which, I at last, in the late afternoon, reached the foot of the cliffs. The day was grey with dark lowering clouds. Fortunately for me, however, it was very still and mild and, in the sheltered places, even warm. I rested in many of them on my slow way. By the afternoon I could tell where I was. In the distance I could even see the town. How it was that no one saw me crawling like some strange monster from the sea-bottom, in and out among the rocks, or lying at full-length among the seaweed, I cannot understand. Perhaps no one happened to pass; perhaps my uniform, stained to the colour of the rocks, prevented people seeing me. Certain it is, that by the time dusk began to close in I was at a place where, even in the state I was in, I could climb to the path at the top of the cliff. You remember where we found the blue geraniums? and where the spring is? I had a long drink at that spring, and, like the wine I had drunk before, it seemed to go to my head. This time, however, I became not stupid, but reckless. I was revived as I had never been revived by wine. The thought of the Sandies and of you spurred me on, and made me somehow recover my strength. I followed the path along the top of the cliff and came to Sandy's house. You know, perhaps, what I found there, sir—or rather, did not find?"

Mr. Carruthers nodded.

"I cannot speak of it yet," said Ascher. "I saw only old Sandy. . . . I changed my dripping clothes there and went on to your house, where I asked for you and then for your sister, and was directed to follow her to Mrs. Abercrombie's house. When I reached there I found that your sister had just left, also that I was at the end of my tether. When I

had had food last I could not remember. My visit to old Sandy, too, had aroused me from the apathy that had possessed me ever since I had found myself on the rocks. I was in a suppressed agony of grief and misery. In such a state sympathy and kindness bring one sooner than anything to the breaking-point. I—I behaved, sir, like a fool, and she like an angel, or, better still, a mother, and I have repaid her goodness with deliberate deceit."

He covered his face again.

"Tut, tut!" said Mr. Carruthers, rubbing his knees with his bony hands, and with his head on one side considering the fire. "Deceit? What kind of deceit? Go on just from where you are."

"I tried to tell her who I was," said Ascher. "Even before she had shut the door, but she saw it distressed me, and would not listen. Strangely enough she remembered having seen me in London before the war at a concert. I had never met her in Rathness."

"No, she was away from Rathness all that year," said Mr. Carruthers. "Go on."

"We talked of the concert a little," Ascher went on, "and you will understand, sir, how the memory of it at that moment affected me. It was like a glimpse back at happiness to one in the outer darkness. Then she took me into her beautiful drawing-room, with its piled music and its piano —and that finished me."

"You fainted again?" said Mr. Carruthers.

"No, but I behaved like a worse fool than before," said Ascher. "But she went and left me to get food, and I pulled myself together, and afterwards, when I realised what music meant to her, and that there was one thing anyhow that I could do for her, I played to her."

"Ah," said Mr. Carruthers. Then, after a moment, "You managed to play—as you used to do?"

"In some respects I don't think I ever played so well," said Ascher.

"Incredible!" said Mr. Carruthers.

"I know it is," said Ascher. "But there was something more helping me, sir, than the mere food and drink, more even than the inspiration of her presence. You know, sir, what an absorbed and sympathetic audience can make a man accomplish; but there was even more. I felt that this might be the last time I would ever play, and the mysterious strength one gets to make a last effort helped me. At the end I knew by her face that I had succeeded. I had given her an exquisite pleasure, she said, and whatever else I might or might not be, she did not want to know it, —for as an artist she welcomed me."

"Bravo, Mrs. Abercrombie!" exclaimed Mr. Carruthers. "Though it is only what one might have expected from Archibald Abercrombie's wife. But now, my dear Ascher, where does the deception come in? It seems to me that if there is any anywhere it is not your fault, but Mrs. Abercrombie's."

"No, sir, it is my fault," said Ascher. "I have allowed her to deceive herself and even others, by my silence. My only excuse is that she had, in a manner, taken possession of me before I came to myself. I only really came to myself this morning, and, as I lay in bed, I reflected that to go on to the end now was the best course. She had offered to take me to you, and, once with you, I knew the thing would settle itself. I have had a strange feeling all day, too, that nothing is of consequence. I feel as I felt that time they told me that I would die soon, that nothing I can do or say can really matter to anyone—that I have nothing to gain and nothing to lose, and that even Mrs. Abercrombie, when she knows all, cannot, if she considers everything, be very angry with me."

"My dear Ascher," said Mr. Carruthers, "if Mrs. Abercrombie is the woman I take her to be—a sensible woman of the world—she will not be angry. I am quite sure she is more artist than anti-German, if by anti-German is meant a person rabidly against all Germans simply because they *are* Germans; and she is more kind woman

than either. . . . So you travelled here with her? . . . Strange . . . and you met no one else who recognised you?"

"Not that I know of," said Ascher, "though I made no effort to conceal myself. I was past that. I only changed at old Sandy's to get rid of my wet clothes. My uncle's disguise as an Englishman, however, served me well. That and sheer luck brought me here. The whole thing reminds me of something I once saw in the midst of the traffic of a crowded thoroughfare, in the days when one had time to notice such things. A snail—not an ant this time, sir—a snail, without its shell even, was proceeding in the leisurely manner of snails across the road. I had not time to stop and lift it into safety, and when I returned to the same spot half an hour later I remembered it, and expected to find its journey cut short. But no—though a hundred or so of feet had probably just missed it—there it was at the other side. It had reached its destination."

"As you have reached yours, my dear Ascher," said Mr. Carruthers. "And now that you have given me your views on your lamentable position as a patriot and an honourable man—may I give you mine?"

"They are what I have come for," said Ascher eagerly.

"Nevertheless," said Mr. Carruthers, rubbing his knees again, "I suppose you expect that they won't agree with yours at all?"

"Won't agree?" exclaimed Ascher.

"Certainly not," said Mr. Carruthers. "You come to me, you say, not because I am a Briton, but because I am a human being. Very well, then, I address you not as a German but as a human being."

"I see," said Ascher. "But, sir——"

"You will excuse my being very plain with you, Ascher," said Mr. Carruthers, "and not be offended if I begin by saying that I really cannot see the need for being melodramatic about this."

"Melodramatic!" said Ascher, flushing.

"Yes," said Mr. Carruthers. "Remember that I am speaking to you not as a German but as a human being. You have a right to be angry with your fate—and at being plunged into all this misery—unnecessary misery most of it, however—as I will show you presently, but yet, for the time being—misery. You have a right to be extremely angry with it, but I cannot see why you should succumb to it."

"I had not thought of succumbing to it," said Ascher proudly.

"You talked of dying," said Mr. Carruthers.

"Is not that rather defying it?" said Ascher. "If I refuse to live branded as a German?"

"But why should you live branded?" said Mr. Carruthers. "No one, unless he were told, would know you were a German. You need never go back to Rathness, where, of course, you might be recognised. I have no intention for the present of returning to Rathness myself. I am engaged here upon a very interesting investigation, in which you could be of the greatest service to me. Now, say nothing yet," Mr. Carruthers went on hastily, as Ascher was about to speak. "Wait till you have heard more of what I have to say. The German nation, I consider, have forfeited all claim upon you. But I cannot see why, because they deserve nothing of you, you should make up your mind to do nothing for the world at large."

"How can I," said Ascher passionately, "when the world at large despises me?"

"My dear Ascher," said Mr. Carruthers, "if you calm yourself and think for one single moment you will remember what the despised have already done for the world."

"I know, I know," said Ascher wildly; "but they were the undeservedly despised. The one thing left to me as a German is my loyalty. If I cast Germany off in her degradation, I shall be deservedly despised. No, Mr. Carruthers—it is no good saying that I am not a German but a human being. I *am* a German. My mother—the one

person I have ever really loved in this world—was passionately a German. I can never forget that."

"Then," said Mr. Carruthers, "you consider it more loyal to submit tamely with the rest to your country's punishment, than to help to retrieve your country's glory by taking part in one of the greatest discoveries of the age?"

"What do you mean, sir?" said Ascher wearily.

"Ah!" said Mr. Carruthers, "it is you who have forgotten, Ascher! We spoke of it on that afternoon among the gorse—above the sea—in the sunshine. Our whole conversation, indeed, led up to it."

"Surely," exclaimed Ascher, interested in spite of everything, "surely, sir, you cannot mean the Vision—the quest after the Soul-Memory of the writing on the wall?"

"Nothing else," said Mr. Carruthers.

"Do you mean to say, sir, that you have been going on with it all this time?" cried Ascher.

Mr. Carruthers laughed.

"Is five years so long a time to give," he said, "for the solution of an age-old problem? In a manner you are right to be surprised however, Ascher. It should have been solved long ago, but for abominable interruptions. . . . Not the war," he went on hastily, as Ascher was about to speak. "I evaded my responsibilities there, having, as I believed, my own special responsibility. Not that I could have fought anyhow—I was assured of that—so that my conscience was salved, fortunately for it, because I should have done what I wanted to do in spite of it. But I could have made munitions, I suppose, or taken some one else's place, or done something I had never done before, and done it so that it would far better have been left undone . . . I did not . . . I shut myself up. I tried, as you say, my level best to carry on my special mission, but the shadow of the great darkness was over me, too, Ascher. I have accomplished in these five years extraordinarily little."

"But you have accomplished something, sir?" said Ascher,

unconsciously assuming the rôle of confidante and comforter that Mr. Carruthers had laid down.

"Yes—a certain amount," said Mr. Carruthers. "And one thing I am now sure of, I am on the right track. My only fear now is that some one may anticipate me, though that, of course, is small-minded in me, and unworthy of an investigator. But the idea is in the air . . . my own thoughts, indeed, may have generated it. . . . Not long since I came upon a little book entitled 'The Gate of Remembrance,' in which was described the finding, by occult means, of certain buried chapels, whose existence had been long forgotten, in the ruins of Glastonbury. That is to say, by tapping what I have called the Soul-Memory, to whom past existences are known, knowledge was gathered which was otherwise unobtainable. . . . Other architectural discoveries are probably now being made by the same means. But, when you come to think of it, Ascher, how much more wonderful is our quest! We, looking down into the depths of the ages, desire to discover, not where men have lived, not even where they have worshipped, but what they have thought, how they have rejoiced, how they have suffered, what they have themselves discovered. Who knows what wisdom may not lie behind the strange undecipherable characters of the ancient script, whose possession might enrich and enlighten the world? The discovery alone of the availability of our means of investigation, if thus established, would open up a new era in the history of occult science."

"Yes," said Ascher, "but——"

"But," Mr. Carruthers interrupted him, "you ask how you can help me? I answer simply by staying here for a time and acting as padding between me and the outer world, by which I mean at present those kind people at the other end of this house. They are now reinforced by Mrs. Abercrombie, who, I strongly suspect, has been sent here by my sister—perhaps at the request of good Mrs. Binnie, who is distressed at the irregularity with which I take my meals. . . . Now, Ascher, I ask you—as one who has seen some-

thing of investigation work—how in the world am I to get on if people are always coming in and saying it is dinner-time and tea-time, and so on, when I am in the midst of really important things? How would you like if you were just beginning to get splendid results in automatic writing, if some one appeared at your elbow reiterating something about soup? I assure you that between Mrs. Binnie and Young Ellen and now Mrs. Abercrombie, I shall never have a chance. It is not, you see, as if their personal interference were all. It is their worrying and being anxious in my neighbourhood that is the really distracting thing. They are literally—though they don't know it, poor souls—killing me with kindness, at least, killing my investigation. Well, now, Ascher, I am sure that you must now see how you can help me. You can remove all this annoyance, tangible and intangible. Mrs. Abercrombie knows you and has evidently taken a fancy to you. You, in your turn, can take all this burden of the care of me off her shoulders, and, in another sense, off mine. If you agree to this, your coming will, I consider, be the turning-point in the history of this investigation. I shall thus be enabled to go on without interruption, either from people coming to look after me at short intervals, or from the mental distress of these people regarding me which continually pursues and often totally upsets me."

"But, my dear Mr. Carruthers," began Ascher, smiling a little in spite of himself.

"I know what you are going to say," said Mr. Carruthers. "You are going to say that this is bathos. You come to me to put a situation before me, which for difficulty and horror could hardly be surpassed. You ask my advice as to what you should do, and I reply by recommending you to do, here and now, what you doubtless consider to be a trifling, nay, a trivial service. But now, I ask you—putting aside all the benefit, and mind it may be incalculable, which will accrue to the world should my investigation succeed—what more could you be doing for

your country at present than you would be doing here getting strong and well, mentally and physically fit? You came to me once before on the verge of nervous collapse—or at least so your uncle said—and I cured you. How? Simply by taking you out of yourself. . . . You come to me again. I will cure you again, make you ready—again by taking you out of yourself—for whatever you wish to attempt. Last time—you admit it yourself—you went forth to fight, chivalrously I doubt not, your body strong enough, or you could never have come through what you have come through, but with your nerves in such a state that you were utterly incapable of carrying out your task. . . . You fainted constantly at crucial moments—you were borne into infamous positions. . . .

"One does not, of course, value the opinion of a U-boat commander either as a commander or as a human being, but consider what sort of an opinion yours must have had of you. You were of no more use to him than a log. Indeed you were very much worse than useless, for in the endeavour to save you, which he would never have made for a log, the only decent man on the vessel was battered and bruised to death. I ask you again—what was the good of that? And if you go back as you are now the same thing will happen again. As I look at you I can see it. It takes no expert to do that. You are far too thin. Your eyes are too bright; your lips, even your hands tremble when you speak. . . . Yet—confound you, Ascher!—never did the Germans need a man—a leader with just your qualities—more than they do now. They have no great men just now, they have only great mountebanks, great brutes, great fools to engineer them, and that's why they have gone off the rails. If you *must* be a German, then be at least their great man—their Cromwell—their Danton—what you will—but able to speak, able to lead, able to inspire, able to fight. . . . While you are in your present state you are no use for any of these things. . . . But, as before, I will cure you—I will prepare you—only give me time. And,

for the present, stay here I implore you. . . . Even if you managed to get back to the Lauenhain, which I very much doubt would be impossible, you could not, you know you could not, really get better there. Here at least you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you are being extremely useful in the interval until you recover your balance. You will, by your playing, charm the other end into quiescence. You will take entire charge of me. I shall put myself under your care. No one but you shall enter this room or know when I take my meals. I shall at once settle up your debts to Mrs. Abercrombie, and, when you wish to return to your country, I shall lend you what you need. In the meantime, I counsel you to remain simply what you are, an artist, as Mrs. Abercrombie said. Afterwards—when you are well again—sane, mentally and physically—be a German again if you please, a great German, the greatest of all the Germans that ever were."

"Mr. Carruthers," said Ascher, "whether this is bathos or not I cannot tell. As you have said, I am hardly sane just now, and I can't think. But I do know it is kindness, and I thank you from my heart. May I give you my answer to-morrow—when I—after I have slept?"

CHAPTER VI

IN WHICH MRS. ABERCROMBIE IN THE ACT OF SETTLING DOWN RECEIVES A SHOCK FROM AN UNEXPECTED QUARTER

THE knocking which disturbed, or rather did not disturb, the nocturnal conclave in Mr. Carruthers's end, was caused not only by Young Ellen but by Mrs. Binnie, who had been called up as reinforcement.

When both had failed to elicit any response and had grown weary of knocking they retired a few paces from the house, and, looking up at the windows of Mr. Carruthers's study, where the light glimmered faintly through a grey-green curtain, they stood still to discuss the situation and take counsel together as to what should next be done.

"This is desperate," said Mrs. Binnie. "We canna let him keep the key ony mair. To think o' him shut in there withoot a supper or a proper tea or even a denner, for the pie was for his denner. He never lockit hissel' in like that afore."

"No," said Young Ellen, "an' mind ye, auntie, I dinna ken if we shouldna speak aboot it."

"Speak aboot it?" said Mrs. Binnie.

"Ay, to Mrs. Abercrombie," said Young Ellen. "I dinna think we should be responsible for leavin' him his lane there a' nicht—lockit in."

Mrs. Binnie considered for a moment.

"Maybe ye're richt," she said. "A' the same," she added, "if she was to ask ony questions, it wouldna be easy to explain aboot that pie."

"We needna tell her aboot that," said Young Ellen.

"Ay, we're bound to tell her," said her aunt. "It's him

bein' left withoot his meat that's the maitter, ye see, an' unless ye let her ken that, she would think we had nae sense comin' botherin' her when she's tired."

"Aweel he maun jist be left, then," said Young Ellen, "for we canna tell her that we took the pie awa frae him."

"No' unless we tell her aboot Dash Forgan," said her aunt.

"An' that we canna dae," said Young Ellen.

"We'll chance it, then," said Mrs. Binnie.

They chanced it, therefore, and went back to their kitchen, which they now had to themselves.

"We've nae choice," said Mrs. Binnie, as she raked out the grate in preparation for the night. "For mind ye, Ellen, yon micht ha' been a fell job wi' Dash."

"It was that," said Ellen, as she put away the spoons. "It pits ye aff ha'in' a sodger for a man. Fancy him suspectin' Mimy o' rinnin' awa' wi' anither man an' her the mither o' his seeven bairns!"

"Ah, that's jist because he's that fond o' her," said Mrs. Binnie, winding up the clock for it was Saturday night. "It's jist men that doesna care twa straes for their wifes that isna jealous o' them."

"A' the same it's a kind o' pit me aff Bob," said Ellen, taking off her butterfly bow and thoughtfully fingering it. "He's anither o' that jealous kind, aye glowerin' an' glumshin'. If he doesna tak' care he'll mak' me tak' Dunwiddie."

"Ah well, Ellen," said her aunt, "I promised auld Lindsay tae pit the maitter o' the mairriage afore ye, but that doesna mean, ye ken, that ye maun tak' Bob. I kent naething aboot Dunwiddie when I said that."

"Then ye're no' agin Dunwiddie, auntie?" said Ellen.

"Agin Peter Dunwiddie?" said Old Ellen. "No' likely."

"He's weel enough aff, I suppose?" said Young Ellen.

"No' far off wealthy," said Old Ellen with unction. "An' though he's auld-like, certainly, whiles they're better auld

than young. They say an auld man's darlin', ye ken, an' a young man's slave."

"I wish he hadna askit me," said Young Ellen.

"Bob d'ye mean?" inquired her aunt.

"No, Dunwiddie," said Ellen. "If he hadna askit me, I never would ha' thocht o' him."

"Ay, twa men coortin' ye at ae time is an awfu' worry," said Old Ellen, reminiscently shaking her head at the clock, which she had just finished winding up.

"Ye see I'm rale fond o' Bob," said Young Ellen. "If I was aye to be spry an' licht-hearted I would much rayther ha' Bob. But there's nae denyin' that Dunwiddie would be a comfortabler man, an' he wouldna lord it ower me the way Bob would dae, he would be that prood o' me."

"Ay, an' there's the shop," said Old Ellen, as she set the meal to soak for the morning's porridge. "A fairm's a' verry weel, but ye're awfu' dependent on the weather. Gi'e me a grocer's for stabeelity, whaur ye ha' a' yer belongin's under cover."

"Yet I would rayther ha' the fairm," said Young Ellen. "I dinna like the smell o' a grocer's shop. An' I dinna like to see Dunwiddie wi' his apron on an' his sleeves rolled up. He looks that saft an' auld-wifie like."

"Aweel, Ellen," said her aunt, "ye'll ha' to mak' up yer mind afore long. I promised auld Lindsay I would see at ye aboot the weddin', an' let him ken what day ye wantit it, next Setterday when I gang back."

"That's anither thing," said Young Ellen. "If I mairried Dunwiddie I wouldna ha', livin' in the hoose wi' him an' me, an auld miser o' an uncle aye interferin'."

"For the love o' God, lassie," exclaimed Old Ellen, "gang awa' to yer bed noo, an' guid nicht to ye. Maybe it'll be shown ye in a dream which is the richt man."

"Maybe," said Young Ellen, but she said it doubtfully, and she was still standing cogitating at the table when she was startled by a sudden and loud knocking at the outer door.

"See wha that is, Ellen," called her aunt, rather unnecessarily, from the top landing where she had just arrived.

Next moment the door was open and Young Ellen, holding a flaring candle, was face to face with the visitor.

"Mr. Carruthers!" she gasped.

It was none other, and he was hatless, collarless, in his oldest coat, as he had risen from his writing.

"Good evening," he said, unaware, or unheeding, that it was long past midnight. "I have come to see Mrs. Abercrombie."

"But I'm afraid, sir," began Young Ellen.

"Tell her if you please that it is an urgent matter," said Mr. Carruthers, "and that I shall be obliged if she will spare me a few minutes."

"I'll tell her, Ellen," came Mrs. Binnie's voice from the top landing.

"Will ye come in, sir, and wait a minute?" said Young Ellen, ushering him into the kitchen, and bringing forward a chair, "till I see if Mrs. Abercrombie——"

"Then pray do so at once," said Mr. Carruthers, sitting down, "and kindly tell her that my time is limited."

"An' he sat doon there, auntie, as if it was one o'clock in the day instead o' one o'clock in the mornin'," Young Ellen said afterwards. At the moment, however, Mrs. Binnie was too occupied with Mrs. Abercrombie to hear her niece's report.

She had found her, after her thirty-six hours of almost continuous exertion, established before the sitting-room fire enjoying the sweets of well-earned repose. She had exchanged her black travelling dress for a passé but still sumptuous kimono, her hair was in two plaits, her slippered feet were on the fender. In one hand she held a fire-screen, in the other a cigarette.

Mrs. Binnie's eyebrows resembled Young Ellen's as her glance fell upon this last item. Only for a moment, however, for Mrs. Binnie, as she was always reminding her niece, had been in good service and had learned to know

her place. She could not help some of her amazement appearing, however, when, on Mr. Carruthers's visit being announced, her lodger said:

"Mr. Carruthers? Certainly. Show him up."

"But—the time o' nicht," Old Ellen reminded her. "And your hair, M'm."

"Will he ever notice it?" said Mrs. Abercrombie.

As she spoke, however, she placed her cigarette between her lips and, picking up a black lace scarf from a table near, she flung it on mantilla-wise.

"Now," she said, removing the cigarette again that she might smile unhindered at her mentor. "Les convenances are propitiated."

This Old Ellen, without understanding a word of it, took to mean that the caller was to be admitted. She withdrew, therefore, to execute the order, and in a few moments Mr. Carruthers was announced.

"How do you do, James," said Mrs. Abercrombie, advancing to meet him with outstretched hand. "I am delighted to see you and still more delighted at being seen by you. Last time we met you appeared to be absorbed in some telegraph wires above my head. I was literally beneath your notice."

"I am sorry," said Mr. Carruthers gravely, coming forward to take the seat by the fire she indicated. "I fear that in social qualities, as in many other things, I am deficient."

"Not at all, my dear James," said Mrs. Abercrombie, resuming her fire-screen. "On the contrary you have come to call upon me before—socially speaking—it was really necessary."

"Ah, but that was because I wanted to talk to you," said Mr. Carruthers.

"Better and better," exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie. "What more complimentary speech could be made to an old woman? Talk on then, my dear James, but do have a cigarette first."

"Thank you," he said, selecting one from the box while he fixed his impersonally meditative gaze steadily upon his hostess's face. "It was about my friend Ascher that I came to speak," he added.

"The very thing I want to hear," said Mrs. Abercrombie eagerly. "Who *is* Ascher, James?"

Mr. Carruthers did not answer at once but sat on in silence, his eyes still fixed upon hers.

"Yet I am sure that he does not even notice what I have on or not on," said Mrs. Abercrombie to herself, and partly to test him, partly because it was so hot, she took off the mantilla again and reappeared in her two plaits. The result was as she had expected it to be. James never even blinked, and they sat on for what seemed an age, as they had been, before he spoke.

All this time he was debating with himself whether or not he should tell Mrs. Abercrombie the whole truth.

When he had made up his mind, after leaving Ascher asleep in his own bed, to come and arrange his affairs at once, he had had no idea of doing anything of the sort. Indeed, the real reason of his coming at that unusual hour was not only because he did not know the time, but because the Intangible Annoyance was so intense, that he had found it impossible to go on with his work.

It would be interesting here if we had time to analyse the discomfort of Mr. Carruthers, and to ascertain how much of it came from outside him, and how much from inside. Probably a very large part of it was hunger, though this of course he did not take into consideration at all. He had missed three successive meals that day, and this, together with the consciousness that his not answering the knocking and moreover locking himself in would be causing acute anxiety, not to say irritation, at the other end, absolutely blocked him. He could do nothing but sit staring before him, wasting time. At last, in despair, therefore, he had done what he had never done

before, and had come to make a call at Mrs. Binnie's end.

Now, however, Mrs. Abercrombie's cordial reception and kindly good-comradeship suddenly caused him to see things from Ascher's point of view. Would it be better, he wondered, on Ascher's account, to sweep away all false pretences, at least between Mrs. Abercrombie and him? to relate Ascher's whole story to this kindly woman of the world, trusting to her sane judgment, her broad-mindedness, her artistic sense?

For about half a minute—so quickly are those crises decided of which no one in the world but the individual who is experiencing them is aware—for about half a minute Mr. Carruthers was on the point of making a clean breast of it.

Then, however, he remembered (for, when he cared to use them, he had a memory and a power of observation second to none)—he remembered what his sister had told him of Mrs. Abercrombie's anti-German feeling, of her speech which had become famous, of her appointment as president of the Rathness branch of the British Empire Union. Clearly, however sympathetic to Ascher she might be, in the capacities of art-enthusiast and human being, as publicly anti-German she could not possibly be so, and to release Ascher from his false position by explaining everything to her would make it impossible for her to do anything but denounce him. To have him denounced would be to have him deported, and to have him deported would be a serious inconvenience at this juncture. Besides, as Ascher had realised, James Carruthers, occult as he was, was very human. His house was divided against itself. What he called outside influences were often the suggestions of his own altruism. To have Ascher cast out now, disgraced and discredited, he felt would plunge him—Carruthers—into a whirlpool of intangible miseries which would wholly incapacitate him, and postpone indefinitely the end of his investigations. This, too, at the very time

when Ascher would be most useful to him by keeping at bay the hindrances already present. The thought of the tablets at Knossos, and the probable shortness of his own existence quite decided him.

"Ascher," he said, resuming his cigarette, which had almost gone out, "is a former pupil of mine."

"I know," said Mrs. Abercrombie, disappointed.

"He had looked," she said afterwards, "as if he were going to be *so* interesting."

"I know," she repeated after a moment, when no more information seemed to be forthcoming.

"He has had dreadful experiences in the war," Mr. Carruthers went on, "and is now suffering from shock, which is principally mental."

"Poor man," said Mrs. Abercrombie, "I thought so. He is a great artist," she added after a moment. "I have heard no playing like his, in a room, for many years."

"He intended to be a professional," said Mr. Carruthers, "before—before his country claimed his services."

"As a soldier?" exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie. "I should have thought he would not have been strong enough?"

"On the contrary, he is very strong," said Mr. Carruthers. "His physical delicacy at present is due to terrible wounds—internal injuries—received when he was on active service."

"On active service?" exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie. "Oh, where? I wonder if he can have met any of my nephews!"

"Very possibly," said Mr. Carruthers, knocking ashes off the end of his cigarette.

"I must find out to-morrow," cried Mrs. Abercrombie excitedly, "if he was on the Western Front."

Here, however, Mr. Carruthers held up his hand for silence.

"Mrs. Abercrombie," he said, "that is why I have come to you. Ascher's injuries, as possibly you may have observed for yourself, are not only physical but mental."

Mrs. Abercrombie nodded silently.

"His mental sufferings have been," Mr. Carruthers went on, "and still are very great. At times he is not far off——"

He waved his cigarette expressively.

"Oh, yes, poor dear, I know," exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie, flinging hers into the fire in an access of sympathy. "I shall never forget last night—and his terrible sobbing. It was enough to break one's heart. His distress appealed to me somehow very specially." She went on dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief. "He reminded me so of Archie—of my boy-husband—none of the nephews, you know, play—and he played so very beautifully. Somehow I had never realised before how the war could affect such as he—how that thrice damned prince of hell the Kaiser has destroyed and injured among so many exquisite things, irreplaceable objets d'art, so many also of the exquisitely and rarely gifted."

"Fortunately, however," said Mr. Carruthers eagerly, throwing away his cigarette also, "Ascher is not yet wholly destroyed. Fortunately he has come to me—to you, Mrs. Abercrombie, before it is too late to save him. If we can keep his mind off his terrible sufferings, if we can distract his attention from the past, if, above all, we can interest him once more in his musical studies—we shall have preserved him, at least from the general wreck."

"Yes, thank God," exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie, giving her eyes a final dab. "Well then—tell me straight off, James—what I can do to help you."

"Bravo!" said Mr. Carruthers. "But I knew I could count upon your goodness."

"Goodness?" said Mrs. Abercrombie. "It is not that. Apart from its being a very real pleasure to me to come into touch at all with such an artist as Mr. Ascher is—I would do anything to thwart those worse than savages that——"

"You mean the Germans, I suppose," interrupted Mr.

Carruthers, smiling a little. "Well, of course, that motive is not a Christian one."

"No," said Mrs. Abercrombie, "we have been told to love our enemies, but the Germans are too large an order. It would take Christ Himself to love *them*."

"You are right," said Mr. Carruthers, "speaking in the aggregate, you are perfectly right. But now about this particular—about Ascher, I have had a long talk with him. He has told me—all that he had to tell, and believe me, Mrs. Abercrombie, if you knew all, you would be even more anxious to help him than you now are."

"That is impossible," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "I could not be more anxious to help him."

"Listen, then," said Mr. Carruthers. "What Ascher needs is, first, full and responsible employment, and second, distraction from his own sad thoughts. With the first I mean to provide him. The second, with your permission, I shall leave to you."

"Yes, yes!" said Mrs. Abercrombie eagerly.

"His employment is to be looking after me," said Mr. Carruthers. "I am engaged just now upon a very interesting and important investigation with nothing less in view, in fact, than the discovery of the meaning of the inscriptions on the Knossos tablets."

"But how fearfully exciting," exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie, flinging back her two plaits like a school-girl of fifteen. "I know all about Knossos. Archie and I were there once. Those Minoans are *so* interesting! To think of their women thousands of years ago dressing very much as we do to-day, and that perhaps Delilah had a hat and frills, for the Philistines were Minoans, too, weren't they? But do tell me," she went on without waiting for a reply, "do you think you are succeeding?"

"I cannot tell yet," said Mr. Carruthers.

"Oh, but you *must*, you know!" said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Why, it would be one of the discoveries of the age! It would do something to make up for all the time that has

been wasted, all the research that has been neglected. Oh, James, *do* pull it off!"

"My dear Mrs. Abercrombie," said Mr. Carruthers, "I am delighted to find you so interested."

"Interested!" cried Mrs. Abercrombie. "I am more than that—I am absorbed. You know Archie—my husband—always used to say that I ought to have been an explorer."

"He was right," exclaimed Mr. Carruthers, "enthusiasm like yours would carry a man to the heart of the antarctic. I am singularly fortunate in having secured your co-operation. What you have to do now, Mrs. Abercrombie, is to leave me entirely to Ascher."

"I see," said Mrs. Abercrombie at once, but her face fell nevertheless.

"He has accepted all the responsibility for me and my meals," Mr. Carruthers went on. "I wish, henceforth, no one but Ascher to enter or so much as approach my writing-room. I wish, when Ascher is not there, to be left entirely alone."

"All right, James," said Mrs. Abercrombie, but she said it disconsolately. "You are quite sure I can't do anything?" she added tentatively after a moment. "Remember how I used to read your ghost stories."

Mr. Carruthers laughed.

"I certainly owe you something for that," he replied. "But indeed I am asking you to do a great deal, I am handing over to you first Mrs. Binnie and Young Ellen—who have been the greatest obstacle so far to the success of my Investigation——"

"The greatest obstacle?" cried Mrs. Abercrombie. "But I thought they were so devoted to you. I am sure their letter——"

"That's just it," said Mr. Carruthers; "they are devoted, and their devotion hampers me—not that I am ungrateful you understand—but their devotion takes the form of constant insistence upon meals——"

"I see, I see," exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie. "They intrude—they interrupt—I *quite* understand, James. You leave 'em to me."

"I will," said Mr. Carruthers heartily, "and I leave Ascher too. His duties to me will be very light. He will merely have to present meals to me, sufficient to sustain life, at what he thinks the right times. By right times, of course, I mean not the ordinary meal hours, but the hours when he sees I have come, in my Investigation, to what he would call a double bar, or, in other words, some culminating point."

"I see, I see," said Mrs. Abercrombie again, "and at all the other times?"

"He will be practically free," said Mr. Carruthers. "I wish you to make him practise if you can—this is quite a decent piano I hear—to talk to him, to amuse him, to bring him, in short, back to sanity of mind and body."

"But won't the practising disturb you?" said Mrs. Abercrombie, whom the Investigation still absorbed, to the detriment even of her interest in Ascher. "You will be able, won't you, to hear it through the wall?"

"I hope so," said Mr. Carruthers. "I am practising automatic writing at present, for which purpose I prefer to have my mind distracted, so that my hand may be placed unreservedly at the disposal of my Higher Intelligence."

Mrs. Abercrombie gave a little shiver of appreciation.

"Oh, James, how delightfully weird!" she said. "Higher Intelligence—*I* see. Well, I'll attend to Ascher."

. . . . . .

According to promise, therefore, instead of staying in bed for breakfast, as both Ellens implored her to do next morning, Mrs. Abercrombie rose at her usual time, though it had been two o'clock, if it was a minute, as Young Ellen reported next morning to her aunt, before Mr. Carruthers left for his own end again.

She then, before breakfasting herself, insisted upon going round to Mr. Carruthers's end, where she found the door

unlocked, according to plan, and the Investigator hard at work.

He had not been to bed at all, first because Ascher was occupying his bed, and second because his Higher Intelligence seemed to be in the vein that night. He had had excellent results in the automatic writing, and was in such high good humour, and so amenable in consequence, that Mrs. Abercrombie actually persuaded him to come back with her to breakfast.

"He has had *one* good meal anyhow," she said to herself as, about two hours later, he went back to his own end again, promising to send Ascher over to her whenever he appeared.

She stayed in the house all day waiting for Ascher, except for half an hour or so spent in viewing the Dove-cote from outside.

"It is really like a dove-cote," she wrote to Reggie when she came in. "Two three-storied gable-ends, with a chimney-stack in the middle, and doors on either side. Mrs. Binnie tells me her grandfather built it. He seems to have built, or rebuilt, or pulled down, most of Wood End, and to have had a fancy for having everything at unexpected angles. This little red and brown village, with its gardens and bushes and its one wiggly street, looks as though it had been dropped accidentally by some giant in the middle of the wood. Even its name Wood End is a mistake. It is not at the end of the wood but in the middle, or between two woods, which hedge it in from all the world. Its station is the only part of it to which its name can apply—but it is a mile and a half distant. Its two churches, too, seem to have got lost. I heard their bells tinkling to-day, but could see nothing of them. Ours seems to be the only big house, barring the doctor's and the minister's, in the village, and, as both the doctor and the minister are away, we depend for support—moral and physical—upon my delightful friend Mr. Dunwiddie.

"You will think 'delightful' too strong a word, perhaps,

but I really mean it. He is so many-sided. Yesterday I made his acquaintance as a special constable, and as a family grocer on holiday. To-day I met him as an elder in top hat and black coat. To-morrow I hope to see him in his working costume as postmaster cum family grocer. I may even yet see him as a courtier, for Mrs. Binnie has told me with great secrecy, but with evident pride, that he has designs upon Young Ellen.

"I could write pages, my dear—but this must go now, or it won't go till to-morrow they say. I must leave the rest till my next. Only one thing I must ask. Have you ever met a man called Ascher who was badly wounded on the Western Front? I can't tell you more now. Good-bye, my dear, for the present."

She wrote more letters after that, but still Ascher did not come, and at dark she went round again to Mr. Carruthers's end.

She found the Investigator at tea.

"I am finding it impossible to work owing to physical fatigue," he said. "I am having another bed made up, and am going to sleep myself."

"Ah, that's right," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "I was just going to advise you to do that. And if Mr. Ascher awakes——"

"He won't," said Mr. Carruthers. "Not even Young Ellen pulling the pillow from beneath his head awakened him."

"Young Ellen pulling the pillow from beneath his head?" exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie, horrified.

"I had forgotten to tell her that he was there," said Mr. Carruthers, "and it was rather dark when she came to make my bed. I've explained it all now, however, and she quite understands everything."

To satisfy herself, nevertheless, that all was right with her other charge, Mrs. Abercrombie found Mr. Carruthers's bedroom before she left, and looked in.

A grey light from the window served to show her Ascher's

face as he lay, flung in the abandonment of utter exhaustion, still dressed, upon the bed. A quilt had been drawn over him, but he had pushed it back, grasping it fiercely in one thin hand.

She replaced it gently before she left.

. . . . . .

Considering all things, it is not to be wondered at, that although Mrs. Abercrombie ordered breakfast as usual at eight o'clock on the Monday morning, and even made signs of assent when she was called at seven, she not only did not make her appearance at the time appointed, but did not enter her sitting-room till the afternoon.

Ascher, however, appeared in the kitchen with orders from Mr. Carruthers, that breakfast for himself and his colleague was to be brought to the entrance-hall, and no further.

"And indeed I'd no wish to go further," Young Ellen reported afterwards to her aunt. "I had had sic a scare last nicht findin' Mr. Ascher in Mr. Carruthers's bed."

"Hoots, lassie, what was to scare ye aboot Mr. Ascher?" said her aunt. "I'm sure he seems a very nice gentleman."

"I thocht he was a corp, an' that Mr. Carruthers had been murdered," explained Young Ellen.

"Murdered!" Old Ellen had cried. "Ye have murder on yer brain, lassie!"

"An' nae wonder," Young Ellen had said, "when ye hear naething but o' folk thrawin' ither folks' necks, though they should ha' to swing for it."

"Hoots!" Old Ellen had rejoined, "pit Dash Forgan oot o' yer head. Wha cares what he says?"

"It's no' Dash alane, it was Bob that was sayin' it," Young Ellen had replied. "He says he's sure it's Dunwiddie that's keepin' me from fixin' up the mairriage day, or if it's no Dunwiddie he says it's Mr. Ascher, for he cam' in when Mr. Ascher was helping me to cairry ower Mr. Carruthers's breakfast."

"Ascher!" Mrs. Binnie had exclaimed. "Did ye nó' tell him ye'd jist that meenit seen Ascher for the first time in yer life?"

"Ay did I," Young Ellen had replied.

"Aweel, Ellen," her aunt had said then, "it's my opeenion that, for the sake o' a' pairties, ye should jist mairry Bob."

"But I'm no' mairryin' for the sake o' a' pairties," Ellen had retorted. "I'm mairryin' to please mysel'."

"Aweel, mairry awa' then, an' be done wi't," Old Ellen had concluded, "for as sure as death this mairriage o' yours is fair pittin' me in the nerves."

. . . . . .

Mrs. Abercrombie not only did not appear for breakfast, she did not appear for lunch either. She slept on and on, and it was nearing tea-time, when Mr. Dunwiddie himself came over from the post office with a telegram for her.

"I thocht I would jist let her ken afore she opened it that it was nae bad news," he explained to Young Ellen; "telegrams is fearsome things in these days."

"Very kind, I'm sure," said Ellen snippily, for, because of her vigil the night before, she was rather bad-tempered that afternoon. "A' the same, if it was me, I would rayther ha' the first read o' my ain telegram."

"Ye needna tell her then," said Dunwiddie. "Ye ken weel enough it wasna for that I came. Am I never to ha' a glimpse o' you?"

"Ye saw me last nicht," said Ellen, relaxing slightly.

"Much guid that did me," said Dunwiddie. "Wi' a' they ither folk there. Besides that was lang syne. Would ye no' think better o' it, Ellen, yet?"

"Better o' what?" said Ellen.

"Better o' mairryin' a dour-tempered, quarrelsome, impident——" began Dunwiddie.

"For mercy's sake tak' care," said Ellen, half shutting the door, "for, whatever Bob may be, he's no ane to be maddled wi'; an' the next time," she added, "that ye come to see

me, dinna come in yer apron nor yet yer shirt sleeves, for I dinna like them."

After he had gone, however, Ellen stood watching him from the window.

"I was gey hard on him," she said, "he meant weel, puir auld crater, an' efter a'," she added, "it would ha' been daft-like o' him to dress up to come across the road wi' a telegram."

This reminded her of the telegram.

Even then, however, she wondered whether she should take it up.

"It's nae bad news," she reflected, "sae it canna be urgent."

Nevertheless, as she reminded herself, a telegram was a telegram, and Mrs. Abercrombie, for all her geniality, had conveyed the impression to her that, like Bob, she was not one to be meddled with.

A few moments later, therefore, Mrs. Abercrombie, roused to her great relief from an uneasy dream, in which she had been vainly endeavouring, on pain of some fell but unknown penalty, to read a ghost story of James's, written in the Knossos characters, was sitting up in bed, tearing open her telegram, while Ellen waited discreetly in the doorway to see if there was any answer.

It was not a long telegram. Ellen could see that. But it took a long time to read, and it obliged Mrs. Abercrombie to adjust her eyeglasses twice over. At last, however, she seized a writing-pad, which lay beside her bed, and scribbled some words upon it. Then, taking money from her purse, she handed it and the paper over.

"Will you take it now?" she said. "I should like it to go as soon as possible."

Then, as Ellen left the room again, she saw her once more take up the pink paper, and, glancing at the answer in her hand, she read—"Lieutenant Archibald Abercrombie, Black Watch, B.E.F., France. Heartiest congratulations. Writing. Abercrombie."

This reply only made her curious as to what the message had been. But she knew that to find out from Mr. Dunwiddie was quite hopeless, and this thought, irritating as it was, reminded her of her elderly lover's importance. It counteracted the effect of the shirt-sleeves and apron, and clothed him in the dignity of a government official. When she entered the shop at the corner of the street, therefore, she was prepared to be as pleasant as before she had been unpleasant. She had no chance of being either, however. Mr. Dunwiddie, though she was certain he saw her come up to the post office end of his counter, was so occupied in weighing out sugar rations, that he never so much as looked at her. Deft-handed and capable-looking, he stood beside his weighing machine, entrenched behind blue bags, and apparently complete absorption. It seemed to be nothing to him that she was at the other end of the counter, being attended to by an underling.

"He's mad at me, that's what it is," said Ellen to herself, as she returned to her own place, crestfallen. "He couldna bear me sayin' that aboot his apron. And nae wonder," she admitted to herself; "I wouldna ha' thocht much o' him if he had. Aweel, that's the end o' Dunwiddie onyway. It's a relief that that's settled."

Nevertheless, as she set about making up pats of margarine for tea, she realised that freedom from uncertainty brings with it sometimes a certain dreariness.

. . . . . .

Mrs. Abercrombie, meanwhile, writing-pad on knee, had indited the following letter in the greatest possible excitement:—

"My beloved Archie,—I have just received your wire, and I hope by this time you have received mine in reply. My dear, I can hardly believe it. You really *engaged!* And to Andy—Andy Kinross of all people! Well you know—though I have not seen her for years—not since we met in Paris in old Lady Kinross's time—how I admire her,

and her brilliant talent. But I should never have dreamed, that she was the kind of woman you would admire.

"Why I don't know, but I never should have dreamed it. As for *her*—of course no woman could resist you—so I am not surprised. But aren't you very proud, dear? I know I am, to be going to have for a niece-in-law the girl that Debussy said was one of the few real geniuses he had come across. Is she still composing? Or has the war stopped that? The last I heard of her was, that she had begun an opera. I wonder if she managed to finish that. I wonder—oh, hundreds of things. But this must go to the post. Do write soon, and tell me as much as ever you can. News like this is fortunately uncensored. How splendid the war news is too! But at the moment I can think of nothing but *your* news.

"God bless you, dear, and your Andy too, and bring the war soon to an end, and you and her safely home.

"Ever, and more than ever, Your devoted old

AUNT EM.

"*P.S.*—Send me as soon as you can Andy's present address.

"*P.S.*—I see I have said nothing of the Dove-cote, but that must keep for another time. I am much too excited now to do it justice, or the people in it. By the way, have you ever met a Mr. Ascher, who was serving somewhere on the western front, and very badly wounded, and is now suffering from the results of that, and very bad shock as well? He plays wonderfully and is quite charming, and is already a great friend of mine. I cannot ask him if he has met you, as I have to avoid all talk of the war. But I am sure if you have met him, you will remember him. He is singularly interesting. "E. D'O. A."

When she had closed and addressed this, she rose and dressed, taking a long time, because of prolonged cogitations at short intervals.

"Andy Kinross," she said softly to herself, again and again, as she paused in a dazed manner to contemplate the engagement. The more she contemplated it, the more dazed she felt.

She recalled Andy as she had last seen her, a slim, undeveloped, dark-eyed girl of sixteen or seventeen, in her grandmother's salon, playing weird compositions of her own, all from memory or manuscript, for she had always refused, her grandmother had said, to attempt to publish anything.

"And that not from modesty, my dear," the old lady had added with a laugh. "She tells me she feels that some day she will be able to astonish the world, and she would rather wait for that than come before the footlights with little twaddly things. Her master says she is quite right too, and really—a suite of hers, that was done the other day at the Conservatoire by the orchestra, is bizarre, but truly lovely."

Mrs. Abercrombie, seated motionless now, comb in hand, before her dressing-table, remembered this saying, and her amazement merged into petrifaction. What had happened? How was it that this girl, so ambitious, so rarely gifted, had come to think of marrying dear Archie—the least musical of all the nephews, and that was saying something, the simplest, the most matter of fact . . .?

"It must be a case of opposites," said Mrs. Abercrombie, "and she must be desperately in love with him."

The thought reassured her, but she was haunted by the dark eyes, more like a pixie's or a water-nymph's than those of a mere schoolgirl.

"It must have been her eyes that attracted him," she said to herself, as she went on with her toilet, "for otherwise she was not in the least attractive—rather the reverse—she was an eerie creature. Dear Archie—I wonder—will she make him happy?"

She wondered more and more as the evening closed in. She became obsessed with the thought of Archie and Andy. As darkness fell, it came on to rain heavily. A sense of

impending disaster was upon her which she found it impossible to shake off. There seemed to be no escape from it anywhere. To read or work or write letters seemed impossible. She sent Ellen round to ask if Ascher would come and play to her, but she came back to say that the door of Mr. Carruthers's end was locked, and, as a new rule had been made that there was to be no knocking after eight o'clock at night unless the door was open, she had had to come away.

In these straits Mrs. Abercrombie decided upon drastic measures, and, seating herself at the piano, she opened the Schmitt Exercises at the first page, and began playing them very steadily, very loudly, and very slowly.

She had only reached the beginning of the second line, when she was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Come in," she called, and Ascher entered, his smiling eyes meeting hers in a mirror opposite.

"My incantation has been successful," she laughed. "Sit down, enchanter."

A moment later he had taken her place on the piano stool, and was playing "Jardins sous la pluie."

. . . . . .

The Schiedmayer, thank God, as she wrote afterwards to Reggie, was in tune and playable, and, after that, Ascher came and went.

A week passed—uneventful, quiet. The cloud of apprehension, which had oppressed Mrs. Abercrombie on the first night of the engagement, had been entirely dispelled next day by a letter from Andy Kinross herself, a delightful letter, full of everything that could be desired. Her future aunt-in-law had written an affectionate reply, in which, however, if the truth must be told, some of her first wonder and amazement had unconsciously appeared. She had asked many questions in it, and was surprised to have no reply, for Andy, it seemed, was in England. She had been doubtless much occupied, however. She was on leave from France, where she had been working in a hospital,

where Archie had been sent to recover from a wound, which he had never thought it worth while to mention. So it had come about—the engagement—but, as Mrs. Abercrombie said, there were a hundred and one things that she still wanted to know, and it was strange that there should be no answer—so strange, that she wrote again at the end of the week to see if Andy had received the letter.

On the evening of that day Ascher did not come in, except for a few moments to say that Mr. Carruthers needed him. He was not very well, a touch of influenza or something, and needed to be kept in bed, which meant, of course, never leaving him.

"Well, I'm sorry," said Mrs. Abercrombie, "but I suppose it's good for me, for now I shall not only get on with my knitting, but my reading. I brought piles of books, and I haven't begun one yet. This Dove-cote is an extraordinary place. I have done nothing since I came to it but talk and listen. Good night—and take these eucalyptus lozenges with you. I have great faith in eucalyptus, and tell James I said he was to take them, and give his Higher Intelligence a chance."

"Good night," said Ascher, laughing; "I'll tell him."

And he went away down the stairs, actually humming a snatch of Rubinstein.

"Poor dear, he's happier," said Mrs. Abercrombie, listening. Then, feeling happier herself, she went across to a side table, where she kept her "piles of books," and was absorbed in looking them over, and in deciding what she should read first, when sounds of footsteps and voices on the stair disturbed her.

"Of course," she said to herself, "more people coming to talk to me, just when I thought I was going to have peace at last. I don't believe there is such a thing as peace in this Dove-cote."

Here some one knocked at the door.

"Come in," she responded, not too cordially.

She was standing with her back to the door at the time,

and did not turn, thinking that either Old or Young Ellen had entered. The silence which followed, however, startled her. It was so unusual. She looked round therefore. A second later she had whisked round altogether, and was standing staring open-mouthed.

"Who is it?" she said faintly.

A girl stood on the threshold—not Old Ellen, not Young Ellen—a girl with a half-smile on her face, and in her strange dark eyes. She closed the door softly behind her.

"Don't you know, Mrs. Abercrombie?" she said, coming slowly forward into the lamplight.

"It can't be *Andy?*" exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie, still petrified.

"Why not?" said the girl, laughing a little.

"It *is* Andy!" cried Mrs. Abercrombie, hastening forward, and taking her impulsively by both hands. "But—pardon me, my dear—I didn't know you again—you have become so—so *beautiful!*"

CHAPTER VII

WHICH BEGINS WITH AN INTERVIEW IN A SITTING-ROOM AND ENDS WITH ANOTHER IN THE COURTYARD OF A PALACE

"YES," said Andy gravely. "And it's a great pity."

"A pity?" said Mrs. Abercrombie amazed. The girl so evidently meant it.

There was silence for a long moment, as they stood still looking at each other. Then Andy gently withdrew her hands.

"Don't let's begin now," she said. "I have come to talk everything over with you. It will take—oh—perhaps all night."

She laughed a little hysterically.

The laugh enlightened Mrs. Abercrombie. It also made her heart sink like lead. As her custom was, however, she seemed all the more cheerful because of this.

"I see," she said briskly. "And I am delighted you have come, my dear."

"I'm afraid it's inconvenient," said Andy, "but I simply couldn't help it. Your letter was so—so understanding——"

Her lip quivered.

"My dear, it's perfectly convenient," said Mrs. Abercrombie hastily. "There is a delightful room for you, and I am charmed to see you. Don't say another word now, but come and change and be comfortable. I hear them bringing your luggage upstairs. We'll have dinner first and talk straight on afterwards."

With these words she bore the new-comer to the guest-chamber, a quaint little room overlooking the street,

papered with a pattern of green ivy leaves and hung with chintz to match. Here, saying "Au revoir, my dear," she presently left her, and went to adjust matters with Mrs. Binnie.

Arrived at last in her own room, however, the mask of cheerfulness fell from her face, and several times while she dressed, she shook her head lugubriously at her reflection in the mirror. A photograph of Archie stood on the mantelpiece, and when she was ready she stood for some time looking at it, before, with one last shake of the head more pessimistic than any that had preceded it, she returned to the sitting-room.

She found Andy already there waiting for her, and till dinner, and during that meal, they talked volubly on indifferent subjects. Their joint efforts to keep on the surface of things established before long a sense of cameraderie between them, and increased their mutual admiration.

"I'm glad I came," said Andy to herself.

"She's no fool anyhow," said Mrs. Abercrombie.

When they reached the coffee stage, and drew their chairs up to the fire, the air was comfortably cleared of constraint.

"Now, my dear," was all Mrs. Abercrombie said, as she settled a cushion behind her back, and placed her feet on the fender.

Andy needed no more.

"I did not answer your letter," she said, "because it was so splendid—so—as I said before—so understanding, that I simply felt I *had* to come—there was no help for it, and let you judge of everything."

"Go on then," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Just go straight on."

"I'll begin at the beginning then," said Andy; "before the war, when I was in Paris working."

"At your music, yes, I know," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "You had begun the score of an opera, I heard."

"Oh, that," said Andy, with a contemptuous shrug of

her shoulders, "that was nothing—but I had just begun to get on. You know what I mean, Mrs. Abercrombie."

"Call me Aunt Em," here interjected Mrs. Abercrombie.

It was the first reference she had made to the engagement.

Andy paused for a moment, looking at her in her grave way, and again Mrs. Abercrombie was struck with a kind of amazement at her strange new beauty. Her memory flew back to old Lady Kinross's salon and the undeveloped sixteen-year-old that she had seen there five years before. The slim lines were still there, but all the awkwardness and angles were gone, leaving in their place an indescribable ease and gracefulness. The dark hair, formerly dragged back schoolgirl fashion from the low broad forehead, was now gathered in thick coils round the small head. The whole face seemed glorified, the once pale cheeks were flushed with colour, the somewhat high cheek-bones were less prominent, and the dark eyes glowed underneath their finely-marked eyebrows. The schoolgirl had been wearing rather a ridiculous dress, chosen by her ladyship, whose tastes were of the rococo order. The girl sitting opposite was robed in something loose and simple, and soft, and dull red, that was wholly satisfying.

"Call me Aunt Em," she said again after a moment.

"Shall I?" said Andy. "Before I have told you my story, I mean?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Story or no story, I'd like it."

"So would I," said Andy.

"Go on then," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "You were in Paris working, and you were getting on. You had got beyond the phase of mere technique—was that it?"

"Yes," said the girl eagerly; "after I saw you that time, I worked desperately hard, preparing—you understand. I had all the rules of counterpoint at my finger-ends,—I slaved at instrumentation, I knew Berlioz by heart, and I was deep in comparing what I had learned, with what had

been actually done by the great masters,—taking lessons straight from them, you understand, when the war cut everything across."

She paused, gazing before her into the fire.

"Yes," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "You gave up working then?"

"I gave up my own work," said Andy, "like everybody else. How could I sit apart with Bach and Beethoven and the rest, while the whole world was calling for help? I went and, after such training as there was time for, I worked in a Red Cross hospital near Paris."

She paused again, and sat still once more, as though enveloped in a sombre shadow of remembrance.

"It was hard work," said Mrs. Abercrombie after a moment.

"It was horrible," said Andy. "It was not the work I minded, but the terrible fewness of the workers—the incompetence—the impossibility. Oh, if you had seen it—the rows of beds—the frightful wounds—I dream about it often at nights, and always the worst is the feeling of hopeless helplessness. We were so few, and so insufficiently trained, the poor men——"

"Don't think of it now," said Mrs. Abercrombie, laying a hand on her knee. "You broke down there—was that it?"

"Yes, I never shall forgive myself for it," said Andy. "I was off work for some time, and they would not allow me to go back. They sent me instead to—to——"

"To the convalescent hospital, where you met Archie," finished Mrs. Abercrombie.

Andy nodded without speaking, and they sat silent for a long moment.

"I was in a strange mood when I went there," Andy went on at last. "It was as though in that sea of death and suffering into which I had been plunged, all my past life with its desires and its ambitions had dropped from me. It was almost as though I had passed through death

myself. For the time being I think I must have been practically out of my mind. Otherwise——" she paused again. "Otherwise I cannot account for what happened—for what I did I mean—when Archie asked me to marry him. We had not seen much of each other when—when it happened. It seems to me now that I must have been asleep—or in a kind of trance." . . .

"And now you have awakened," said Mrs. Abercrombie.

"No," said Andy, regarding her with her dark mournful eyes. "I am still not myself. The only difference is that now I know I am not, and I am afraid—desperately afraid, Aunt Em—that I may be going to waken."

"I see," said Mrs. Abercrombie quietly again, though inwardly she was in a turmoil. "Well, my dear—you were right to come to me. You—you think now, you do not care enough for Archie?"

"It's not that," said Andy eagerly. "I do care for him—more than for anybody in the world, but only—oh, do understand me, dear Aunt Em—I care for him only with the human part of me—and the other—what my master used to call the demon part of me, is so strong—I am afraid of it—it is so much stronger."

"You mean the music, of course," said Aunt Em, trying to speak, as she said afterwards, in a commonsense way, though her wits were reeling. "But surely, my dear Andy, if Archie has the human part of you—he will be satisfied. No man surely would be jealous of Bach or Beethoven?"

"Least of all poor Archie," said Andy, laughing ruefully. "Because he has no idea, and never will have, of their power over me. Oh, do not misunderstand me—he is the dearest boy in the world. But shall I be able to make him happy—Aunt Em, tell me—shall I, shall I?"

It was the strangest thing, as Mrs. Abercrombie said afterwards, to see this lovely creature ask this question, leaning towards her in her dull red gown, her white arms outstretched in passionate entreaty. A memory of a play

of Yeats came into her head—in which a newly wedded bride is lured away by fairy music from her home and husband to unknown regions. It was as though this half-sprite, half-bride, were appealing to her, while yet there was time, to prevent a tragedy.

"I cannot tell," she said suddenly, in spite of herself.

Then cursing herself for an old fool—

"No, no, I am talking nonsense," she said. "The happiest marriages are often just such as yours will be. I speak from experience. My husband was an artist."

"Ah, but so were you," Andy burst out. "Oh, don't think I love Archie the less for it—but—but—he is different."

This was so true that there was no denying it. The speech roused Mrs. Abercrombie, however, reflecting as it did upon her beloved.

"Whatever he may be as an artist," she retorted sharply, "I am convinced that Archie is a perfect lover. He would do anything to make you happy."

"Ah, that's just it," exclaimed Andy. "It would be better if he were more selfish."

"More selfish?" exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie in her turn.

"Yes," said Andy, "my being here just now is simply because of his unselfishness. He insisted upon my giving up my work in France and going on with my own work again. He said it gave him more heart to fight knowing that I was doing what I wanted to do. But it is that which has aroused me—made me aware at least of—of everything. Before that, I had forgotten—now I am remembering. . . . When your letter reached me I was at my aunt's house in the New Forest wrestling with the first fugue I had tackled for nearly four years. I had not remembered how splendid it was to do it—I was absorbed—possessed—I had gone mad for the moment—I had been transported to another world. And there your letter of—shall I say—congratulation?—but, dear Aunt Em, it was not altogether that

(though I could see you meant it for that), there your letter found me. It had the strangest effect—it brought me back to my human self—but I found I was no longer content to be human. The demon—well—I told you I was possessed. . . . At the same time, some things you said in your letter brought back to me the time when I had met you before, and when you had understood everything so absolutely, and so—knowing how you loved Archie—I came," Andy concluded.

"My dear, I thank God you did," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Now let's thrash it out together."

She sat silent again after that for what seemed a long time, while Andy, silent too, sat watching her. Twice she turned and found her with her dark eyes fixed upon her. There was no anxiety in them now, however.

"She is depending upon me," said Mrs. Abercrombie to herself, and the thought, as she would have said, rattled her.

"But Archie is depending upon me too," she reminded herself, and this thought in its turn steadied her.

"I can't see, Andy," she said at last, "why—demon and all—you should not make Archie happy. He may not understand everything, but he does understand evidently that the demon must have an innings sometimes; and he is content to share you with him."

"But he hasn't really met the demon yet, you must remember," said Andy, smiling a little.

Talking it over was reassuring. Put into words her vague fears seemed much less terrible.

"He has never seen me when possessed—caring for nothing in the world but the one thing," she added.

"My dear, I'd chance it nevertheless," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "He is a soldier, remember, and will often be away from you. The demon may prove to be Archie's best friend yet. The more I look at you the more desirable I find the demon."

Andy laughed for the first time. She had a merry, infectious laugh.

"You see now, don't you," she said, "what I meant when I said it was a pity? If I had had the plainest nose and eyes and mouth that ever were made, I would have been quite happy."

"I don't believe you," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "And at all events I can speak for Archie. He always had a weakness for good looks."

"Yes, he is devoted to you," said Andy.

They laughed together, and Mrs. Abercrombie poked up the fire.

"Good heavens! it's half-past eleven!" she exclaimed, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece. "You will find biscuits and drinks in the cupboard over there. Do get them, there's a dear, and let us resuscitate ourselves."

Andy rose and crossed the room.

"What—Schiedmayer?" she said, as she examined the piano in passing. "Have you been playing?"

"No, my dear, but a greater than I—as you shall hear," said Mrs. Abercrombie.

Then a sudden thought struck her.

"Does your demon ever want assistance?" she said, "or would he disdain the help of a first-rate human musician?"

"Is there such an one here?" said Andy lightly, as she brought forward the drinks and biscuits.

"About composition I don't know," said Mrs. Abercrombie, "but he plays like—like another demon."

"Really?" said Andy, surprised.

"You shall judge for yourself to-morrow," said Mrs. Abercrombie, as she accepted a glass of soda-water. "And, whether you like his playing or not, I hope you will take an interest in him."

"I will if he is interesting," laughed Andy.

She felt all of a sudden strangely gay and light-hearted. The doubts and fears and troubles that had overwhelmed

her had vanished like wraiths in Mrs. Abercrombie's genial presence.

"Well he *is* interesting," said her hostess; and when Andy had sat down again she poked up the fire once more, and told her everything she knew about Ascher.

She told it well, too.

Andy, leaning sideways against the mantelpiece with the glow of the fire upon her, saw picture after picture of him rise vividly before her. She saw him as a radiant boy listening to Ysaye. She saw him in his sailor's clothes, pale and haggard, upon Mrs. Abercrombie's doorstep. She saw him in her dimly lighted hall sitting talking about the concert—in the drawing-room in his paroxysm of grief—at the piano—on the journey—

And when at last in the small hours she went to bed and to sleep, she dreamed about him.

As for Mrs. Abercrombie, she did not dream or even sleep till morning.

After a time, giving up the attempt to compose herself to slumber, she sat up to meditate.

She spoke too, from time to time, apparently to the bedpost.

"Poor Archie," she said more than once. "But it's better now than afterwards. She has begun to realise it herself . . . all that she doesn't realise is, that she doesn't, and never did, care two straws for him."

Here there was a long pause.

"Or does she?" she went on at last. "If she doesn't, why should she have been so distressed—or is it only loyalty and pity that she mistakes for love, having never experienced it? Yet—she was genuinely distressed—and she cares for him more than anyone in the world she says. And who else would she find who would put up with her demon better than my easy-going, chivalrous Archie?"

Another long pause here intervened.

"Damn her good looks!" Mrs. Abercrombie went on again. "If it had not been for them this would never have

happened. As she says, it is a great pity she has a face like a wood-nymph's. If she had had thin hair and specs, and no figure, and flat features, she would have been far happier, and so would Archie."

Another long pause.

"But Archie *is* happy," she continued, "and, after all, why should he not be, if she sticks to him—though if she didn't, I shouldn't wonder if he soon got over it. These war-engagements—well they're not married yet anyhow. A few weeks of uninterrupted demon will settle things one way or the other."

Here a new thought suddenly occurred, which necessitated very profound and prolonged cogitation. When they were resumed, the arguments had become fragmentary.

"If only one knew who he was," she muttered. "James vouches for him, and James—though he is half-mad—is a gentleman." . . .

"A mystery doesn't necessarily imply anything discreditable. Andy, if it comes to that, is mysterious herself. They *say* Lady Kinross was her grandmother, but now, more than ever, I have my doubts. . . . For anyone more unlike". . .

"It can't do any harm anyhow," she added, after another pause. "Indeed it may be providential."

And this conclusion, unsatisfactory as it may seem to the casual reader, soothed her wonderfully.

. . . . . .

"Auntie," said Young Ellen to her companion in the box-bed in the room through the wall just about that moment. "There's surely something wrang wi' Mrs. Abercrombie. She's aye speakin' an' better speakin'. I canna get sleepit for her."

"Ye'd better see if she's wantin' onything then," said Mrs. Binnie drowsily, as she turned over.

"She's no' wantin' onything, or she would ha' rung her bell," said Ellen.

"I ken," said Old Ellen, "but if ye gang in it'll quiet her."

"Ye're richt," said Young Ellen; and she slipped forthwith from the bed and, by the light of a taper, found her way to Mrs. Abercrombie's room.

"Come in," said that lady in answer to her knock, and entering, Ellen found her seated bolt upright among her pillows.

Ten minutes earlier, in the throes of her self-communing, Mrs. Abercrombie would have been furious at the entrance of Young Ellen. Now, however, having reached what Mr. Carruthers had called a double bar in her meditations, and being just as far from sleep as ever, she welcomed her.

The contrast also between Young Ellen's round polished face and tight plaits, and the face she had expected to see when she called "Come in," vastly tickled her.

"Well, what is it, Ellen?" she said gravely, nevertheless.

"I just wanted to see, M'm," said Ellen, "if ye wantit onything. I heard ye speakin', an' I thocht perhaps——"

"Ah, I disturbed you," said Mrs. Abercrombie remorsefully.

"Oh no, M'm," said Ellen dejectedly, "I wasna sleepin' onyway. I hardly ever sleep now, M'm."

"Hardly ever sleep?" exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie. "What is the meaning of that? A young woman like you should not be sleepless. Sit down on that chair there, and tell me why you are not sleeping."

"Oh, thank you, M'm," said Young Ellen, setting down her candle and obeying. "I'll be glad to, for I'm jist dementit wi' thinkin' to mysel', an' my Auntie'll no' listen to me any longer. It's aboot my mairriage, M'm."

"Ah," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "You mean about your marriage to Mr. Dunwiddie? Well, surely there should not be much to worry over in that! I consider Mr. Dunwiddie quite the catch of the neighbourhood."

"So he is, M'm, so he is," said Ellen, distressed. "I've been brocht to see that."

"Well, what's the matter?" said Mrs. Abercrombie.

"The matter is," said Ellen—"and it's all my fault, M'm—that I ha' given him offence and lost my chance o' him."

Here Ellen's smooth face screwed up suddenly into wrinkles, and tears began to course down both sides of her nose.

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "I'm sure he is too sensible a man and too fond of you to be put off by any silly little mistake. Tell me how you offended him."

With folded arms she then listened judicially, while Ellen told the whole story of the bringing of the telegram, of her remark about the apron, and of Mr. Dunwiddie's changed demeanour.

"So ye see, M'm," she concluded, wiping her eyes, "he has cast me off for ever, and that's what's botherin' me."

"Then don't let it bother you for another instant," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Such things happen constantly. I'll put it all right for you."

"Oh, will you, M'm, will you?" cried Ellen.

"Yes; but let this be a lesson to you," said Mrs. Abercrombie.

"It will—it will," said Ellen. "I'll never say apron to him again, M'm."

"You had better not," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "At least until you are Mrs. Dunwiddie. Now go to bed again and sleep—or you'll look an absolute fright to-morrow when Mr. Dunwiddie looks in to make it up with you."

Ellen accordingly went to bed.

"Was she wantin' onything?" said Mrs. Binnie, as, cold, but comforted, her niece scrambled in beside her.

"No," said Ellen.

"She took long enough to tell ye it then," said her aunt.

But to this Ellen made no answer.

She preferred that her aunt should not know the subject of her conversation with Mrs. Abercrombie. Dunwiddie's

defection was as yet unknown to her, and now it might not be necessary for her ever to know of it. Pride had prevented her telling of it before. Now confidence in Mrs. Abercrombie kept her silent.

Ellen slept.

Others, however, were still awake that night.

In Mr. Carruthers's end great things were a-doing.

Ascher, leaving his invalid safely tucked up in bed, had retired to the writing-room and had just established himself comfortably in the one chair with a book, when he was excitedly recalled to the bedroom. He found Mr. Carruthers sitting up.

"Ascher," he exclaimed as soon as he entered, "an extraordinary thing has happened to me. I have had the most wonderful Memory that I have ever had."

"A Memory, sir?" said Ascher bewildered.

"Yes," said Mr. Carruthers. "I mean the—the—what I call the Soul-Memory—that lies behind and outside our memory of this present life and extends back through ages of other lives. Just now I am certain I tapped it, Ascher."

"Do you really think so?" exclaimed Ascher. "What makes you think so?"

"The detail of it," said Mr. Carruthers, running both hands through his hair, and staring as though he saw his vision still before him. "It was extraordinarily vivid, of course, but I don't lay much stress on that—for I have been saturating my mind with all I can find about Knossos; and, as one reads, one unconsciously pictures things sometimes more vivid than they are in reality. But this, that I have seen now, was no more like what I have read than the red earth and the palms and the temples of India are like the map of India. There is so much that is indescribable, that is left out of every description, and it was this undescribed detail that I saw—those things left out that I became aware of."

He paused again.

"Tell me what you can," said Ascher. "Was it Knossos you saw?"

"I think so," said Mr. Carruthers. "Yes, I am almost sure it was."

"Then would you like me to take notes?" said Ascher.

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Carruthers, "and quickly before it fades again. Sit down there," he went on, pointing to the bottom of the bed when Ascher returned with a writing-pad and a pencil, "and begin at once. . . . I was lying still just as you left me—on my right side, with my hand under my check—so——" he suited the action to the word and then resumed his sitting posture. "I was lying like that, but not in the least asleep, when suddenly I found myself in a great walled court-yard filled with a heavy scent of flowers. It was very hot. That was the first thing I noticed; and this is the first, Ascher, of what I have called the undescribed details, which convince me that what I experienced was not mere imagination. It was a heat such as I have never known in this life. I have never been beyond Europe, you remember, and not even so far as the south of Europe. I have read of such heat, of course, but reading of it is, I know now, very different from feeling it. The air around me seemed to burn. The great flag-stones underfoot, the masonry all round radiated heat like the walls of a furnace. I seemed to myself to be melting away in the midst of it, and, strangest of all, with regard to this point of heat, it seemed to have burned away everything breathable in the atmosphere. This I could never have imagined. I pant now when I think of it. My hair was wet and limp like seaweed, I was dripping with perspiration. My eyes—my whole head, ached with the glare of everything. My ears, too, seemed submerged as though I were under deep water. I could see enough, however, to recognise my whereabouts. Right opposite me, was the double axe on the great gate that I have seen so often. The sun was shining full on it. There was no mistake about it, and besides, on the wall underneath it, was the inscription in

the Minoan character. . . . You probably think, Ascher," Mr. Carruthers went on, "that this is all imagination—but what I have now to tell you will convince you that it was real—the memory of something real. I have said I felt as though my ears were submerged, but I found presently that this was because of a great noise of talking. My dear Ascher, I was hearing the Minoan language—the spoken language of the mysterious inscriptions. . . . You have no idea what a shock this gave me. It was as though, toiling doggedly up a dull ascent, I had reached a point all of a sudden whence I could see the stupendous summit. The strangest and most tantalising part of this, however, was the familiarity of what I heard amid all its utter unfamiliarity. The effect was as though something were interposed between it and my present understanding of it. I gather that it had been well-known to my Soul-Memory, and that that which obscured its meaning was simply my present mental apparatus. But now here comes the most maddening thing of all. As I was sitting—it seems to me now at least that I was sitting—on the scorching pavement, a man came forward out of the crowd who were standing about the gateway. And now, Ascher, here is another detail. If I had been merely imagining him, surely I would have seen this man as a Minoan, or at least in some sort of dress that in my reading had become familiar to me. I would have imagined him with the tight waist and gold ornaments characteristic of the place in which I was meeting him. But this man and all the other men and women who came afterwards were totally unlike any persons or pictures that I have ever seen. I am certain of this, Ascher, though as you know I never could describe clothes. The clothes they were all wearing were certainly not Minoan, at least they were not of any of the periods known to us at present. Another thing—the man was no dream-figure, indefinite, unreal, breathless, though in one sense he was breathless because he was panting with heat and excitement and gesticulating wildly and pointing at me, and the strange thing was that, though what

he said was incomprehensible to my mind—something—my Soul-Memory, I suppose, suddenly understood and realised that, for some injury I had done him, he meant to do for me. He was a workman of some kind for his hands were hard and calloused, and—another detail, Ascher—splashed with a curious purple colour. There was a deep tear or cut, too, in one of his purpled fingers, and even at that awful moment the thought crossed my mind of blood-poisoning. But before he had well reached me the whole crowd came surging in behind him, and I realised that there was nothing for it but to speak up in my own defence. Then—I got up with my back to that wall—and—you'll never believe it, Ascher—I *did* speak, in the language, too, that they all were speaking, though I did not understand one word I was saying. But they understood me. I could see by their faces they did. They even stopped for a moment in full career to listen to me. Then an old wretch, who stood grinding his teeth in the middle of the front row, shouted something at me. I shouted back, some one answered again, I yelled a reply, and then they all rushed in upon me."

"And then?" said Ascher. "You don't mean to say it stopped there?"

"Yes," said Mr. Carruthers. "I suppose they killed me. But whether they did or not is, of course, neither here nor there. The point is they understood me—they answered me —I answered them. Was there ever anything so maddening?"

"Encouraging you mean?" said Ascher. "The Soul-Memory is there all right you see. It is merely the connection that is awanting between it and your present—er —mental mechanism."

"*Merely!*" exclaimed Mr. Carruthers, bitterly.

"Can't you think of even the sound of one of the words you spoke?" Ascher went on. "It might be like some other word—in Greek, for instance, that would help us."

"You will drive me distracted, Ascher," cried Mr. Carruthers. "Of course that is just what I want to remember

—but all I remember of the cursed thing is that it had a strange sort of lilt in it and long-drawn sliding vowel sounds, and of what use is that to anybody?"

Here the Investigator seized his tousled head wildly between his hands and rocked himself to and fro on the bed.

"If I could just remember one syllable," he groaned.

"But you can't, sir," said Ascher, coolly. "You'll never do it that way, at least—by trying to remember I mean—your present brain can't do it. Your only chance—I am only reminding you, sir, of what you have told me yourself—is to slack off just as you were doing just now and give your Soul-Memory another opportunity."

"You're right, Ascher—of course you're right," said Mr. Carruthers, calming himself by a great effort.

"Lie down in the same position you were in before, sir," said Ascher, "and I will leave you, but I shall not go to bed, I shall be in the next room reading. Call me if—if you want anything."

"I will," said Mr. Carruthers, at once disposing himself once more in a horizontal position. "And meanwhile I shall be obliged if you will write out those notes for me. Not that they are of any use, now that I come to think of it, except that they may induce the—the frame of mind necessary. And, as you say, Ascher, the whole episode was encouraging. These people understood me, and they were Pre-Minoans I am certain."

"Pre-Minoans!" exclaimed Ascher.

"I should not be surprised," said Mr. Carruthers, sitting up again, "if they belonged to some period beyond the range of modern discovery, and if what I experienced took place in the very oldest palace of Knossos, of which nothing is now left but the dust in which lie the foundations of the others."

"Well, sir, I will leave you," said Ascher firmly, for his patient's excitement had begun visibly to rise again.

"And do the notes, mind," ordered Mr. Carruthers, as,

turning down the lamp on the dressing-table, Ascher left him to his visions. . . .

For half an hour or so Ascher busied himself over the notes. Then, leaving them laid neatly on the writing-table, he drew the one chair up to the fire again.

His solitary thoughts there, for the first time, were not all unhappiness. The shadow of remote ages rested beneficently upon him, dulling for the time being even his dreadful memories. Looking down into the abyss of time the ruin of empires seemed a small thing, and he himself immune from responsibility by reason of his insignificance.

His thoughts passed then to the quest after the meaning of the Ancient Script, and he wondered idly whether it were insanity or transcendent sanity. At all events he concluded it meant much to his old friend, and to help him to preserve his reason during the strange task he had set himself would be doing him, and perhaps the world, a service. The future seemed not to exist for him that night. Like the immediate past it was blotted out for the time being.

"I must have reached some pause between the acts," he said to himself, and in this thought, too, there was a certain restfulness.

It brought him back, however, to the point whence he had started, to his notes on the writing-table, and the quiet room.

He realised that no summons had come from the bedroom, though, by the clock on the mantelpiece, he saw that nearly an hour had passed. As he sat still looking at the clock, however, he became aware of a slight but steadily recurring noise, "a long-drawn sliding vowel sound," which brought him to his feet in an instant. Smiling, he went across the room, along the passage, and into the bedroom, where the light from the lamp on the dressing-table fell full upon the Investigator lying oblivious of all things, modern as well as ancient.

CHAPTER VIII

IN WHICH AMONGST OTHER THINGS SOME ACCOUNT IS GIVEN OF WHAT HAPPENED ON THE FIRST DAY ON THE KNEES OF THE GODS

FEW things are more conducive to early rising than a whole night of unbroken sleeplessness. Mrs. Abercrombie, after she had had her morning tea, did not tarry in bed for a single moment. Her guest found her seated by her side, alert and watching, when she awoke about an hour later.

"Well, my dear," were the first words that greeted her, "how do you feel about getting to work right away this morning?"

"To work?" Andy exclaimed, sitting up. "But am I really to work here, Aunt Em?"

"Why not?" said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Did you think I was joking last night, or do you not think you could work here?"

"Oh, couldn't I?" exclaimed Andy, looking round ecstatically. "But—shouldn't I—wouldn't it be a trouble to you?"

"Entirely the reverse, my dear," returned Mrs. Abercrombie. "My poor Archie used to say that I was born to be companion to a worker."

"And so you were," said Andy. "You make one feel all kinds of possibilities."

"Come along then," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Or no—wait—they shall bring your breakfast to you here, and that will allow of my getting your work-table ready. Let me see. You want music-paper. There is some among the repertoire left by the uncle, who is a piano-tuner. He

seems to have his ambitions too, poor man. There's music-paper enough to write a dozen fugues on. Then for your masters."

She ticked them off upon her fingers.

"For Bach I have the Well-tempered, of course, and B Minor Mass and the Passion Music.

"For Beethoven, the symphonies in piano score and Fidelio.

"For Schumann, the concerto and the quintette and all the songs.

"For Schubert, the C Major and the Unfinished and all the songs.

"Will that do for a start?"

"Gloriously!" exclaimed Andy.

"Au revoir then," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Your breakfast will be here immediately, and when you come into the sitting-room, you will find the coast clear (for I am to be out till lunch-time) and only the gods awaiting you."

She was as good as her word, for Andy, when she entered the sitting-room, found it empty, and the round table covered with an ink-bespattered green cloth, which belonged, she supposed, to the piano-tuner, and was wont to be used by him in his inspired moments. Upon this were ranged in readiness a large, very full ink-bottle, at least half a dozen pens, and about the same number of pencils, a pen-knife, a huge chunk of india-rubber, an expanse of clean pink blotting-paper, the music-paper, and all the masters.

It was an inspiring spectacle, and, at the sight of it, the demon in Andy, who had been waxing more and more rampant all the time she was dressing, fairly swept her into the low chair, which stood in position in front of the pink blotting-paper. Before finally letting go, however, she wrote a letter to Archie.

"Dear boy," she wrote, "as you will see by the heading I am with Aunt Em. She is, as she always was, a dear, and we are already as though it were only five days instead of five years since we met in Paris. She has asked me to

stay on indefinitely here and work, and, as you won't let me come back to France, or do war-work like other people, I have accepted in the meantime. I simply couldn't help it. It's so delightful here. I don't mean the scenery. I haven't been out to-day yet, and it was dark when I arrived in the village last night. It's the house I mean, the atmosphere, Aunt Em, the altogether."

Here followed a description of her own room and of the sitting-room as she had just found it, with a list of the preparations.

"If I can't make way now I shall be an absolute fool," she concluded.

She sent off this letter by Young Ellen to the post, and then she sat down again in the low chair.

The "Well-tempered" was on the top of the pile, and, opening the second volume at random, she found a fugue she did not know well.

"Here goes," she said, as she copied down the subject.

Then, closing the Bach again, she set herself to work out the fugue.

In a quarter of an hour she was fathoms deep in it. She heard nothing earthly any more, she saw nothing earthly. Outside the windows, from time to time, there was a whispering of withered leaves, and a soft deep sighing beyond them, as the wind passed over the woods. A grim portrait of Beethoven, which hung over the mantelpiece, frowned down upon her unheeded. Another protégé of Mrs. Abercrombie's—a robin—came in at one of the windows, and hopped quite near without disturbing her. Mrs. Abercrombie herself, opening the door very softly at a quarter to one, was totally unnoticed, and withdrew again hastily as Young Ellen appeared, on her way upstairs to lay the table for luncheon.

"I am rather tired," she said to Young Ellen, "and I want to talk to you. I am going to have my lunch in bed. Take Miss Kinross's in to her, and then bring me mine."

"Very good, M'm," said Ellen with alacrity, for from her

scullery window that morning she had seen Mrs. Abercrombie step in to Mr. Dunwiddie's. Her high hopes of the result of the mission, however, were dashed to the ground, when Mrs. Abercrombie, waiting till she had fetched her a hot bottle, and her luncheon, and her knitting, and some books, and that morning's papers, said in a cold-hearted voice—

"I am sorry to tell you, Ellen, that Mr. Dunwiddie thinks that things between you had better remain as they are. And I must tell you, too, that, since I saw him, I sympathise with him, and am very much annoyed with you, Ellen, for allowing me to go at all to him upon such an errand, while concealing from me the important fact that you were engaged to another man."

"It's a lie he tells, M'm!" exclaimed Young Ellen, her round cheeks scarlet, her round eyes almost starting out of her head. "I *never* said I would mairry Bob Lindsay!"

"Perhaps not, but you conveyed the impression that you intended to do so," said Mrs. Abercrombie relentlessly. "And Bob told Mr. Dunwiddie in public last night that if he dared to interfere with his young woman again he would put him through his own bacon-slicer. Mr. Dunwiddie naturally feels his position in the affair to be undignified, and desires to take no further steps in the matter."

"The coward!" cried Ellen, subsiding into indignant tears. "He's jist feared o' Bob Lindsay, that's what he is. He kens weel enough I hadna made up my mind—for I said that, whenever I had made it up, he would be the first to ken o' it!"

"In that case, Ellen," said Mrs. Abercrombie, softening a little, "I think it will be for your aunt to take the matter in hand. If you will ask her to come up I——"

"Eh, mercy no, M'm!" cried Ellen. "Dinna speak to her aboot it, for God's sake! I'd rayther mairry Bob. 'Deed I'd rayther mairry Bob noo onyway, for a man that pits hissel' afore his sweetheart an' winna raise a finger to keep her is no' worth a docken."

"I agree with you, Ellen," said Mrs. Abercrombie, as the forsaken damsel made tempestuously for the door. "But I would remind you that it is not necessary for you to marry Bob simply to save Mr. Dunwiddie from annoyance."

"If I thocht Dunwiddie would think *that*, M'm!" said Ellen, stopping short in the middle of the floor, and clenching both her hands, "I would die an auld maid, M'm."

"A course which I would strongly advise," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "At all events," she added, "do nothing without considering."

"Considering!" exclaimed poor Ellen. "It's considerin' that's played the mischief wi' me. A' the same thankye kindly, M'm," she added. Then, wiping her eyes, she departed.

"I hope Mrs. Abercrombie is not ill?" said Andy anxiously, when the luncheon arrangements were explained to her.

"Oh no, Miss," said Ellen, "and she told me to tell ye that she would see ye at tea-time when she hoped ye would have got finished."

"Finished!" exclaimed Andy to herself. But the thought spurred her to fresh efforts. Nevertheless she was still hard at it when, about a quarter to four, Mrs. Abercrombie looked in again.

"Bring up tea at five to-day instead of four," said that lady when a few minutes later Ellen appeared in answer to her bell.

At four-thirty Andy had finished her fugue. It was ready to be compared with the original.

"But I won't begin that till after tea," she resolved, and, sitting down to the piano, she began to play over what she had written. She played slowly and with many pauses, trying the bolder combinations of notes again and again, now loudly, now softly, and this halting rendering gave to the whole a disconnected desultory effect—especially as heard on the other side of the wall in Mr. Carruthers's writing-room.

Mr. Carruthers was not there himself. His Knossos adventure had resulted in a rise of temperature.

"Though God knows it's nothing now to what it must have been when I *lived* there!" he remarked.

It was bad enough, however. He had slept most of the day, and he had just awakened very much better and quite cool, when the sound of Andy's playing penetrated to his seclusion.

"There's Mrs. Abercrombie incanting you again, Ascher," he remarked to his attendant, who all day had never left him. "Go over now and play to us. It will do me good and you too."

"Would you like it, sir?" said Ascher, but he said it without enthusiasm, for never had he felt less like playing. The spell of the ancient palaces was still upon him. His spirit had been caught up out of the turmoil of grief and horror, which had all but overwhelmed him, on to the plane of the immensities, and had dwelt all day upon a peak of contemplation, whence he had been able to view all things from an entirely new angle. If it were true, he reflected, and it seemed to him convincingly true that day, that existence followed upon existence through cycle after cycle, then the worst disgrace and ruin that could befall a nation or an individual were but the inevitable payments of obligations incurred in former existences. They were incidental and not irretrievable. On the other hand those who were the cause of suffering and agony, though they might escape present punishment, could not escape destiny. Why then should he spend himself raging and striving as though the tremendous machinery of the universe were in need of his assistance? The avenging cycles would roll on without his puny help, meting out justice, controlling the rise and fall of nations. His sense of irresponsibility grew and grew till he saw himself no longer as the degraded German, as one of a doomed and dishonoured nation, but as an individual, a free spirit, a man with but a remnant of his present life left, but still time, perhaps, to help to add a stone to the cairn

of human knowledge. He asked no more, he told himself, than to live to the end, with the Investigator, this life, bare of everything to all appearance, but set about with enthralling possibilities.

He had just reached this point in his reflections when Mr. Carruthers called for music, and, all things considered, it was perhaps no wonder that he did not respond with his usual alacrity. It was as though from the peace of his abstraction he were being dragged down suddenly and painfully to lower planes.

"Of course if you *want* it, sir——" he said, unwillingly.

But Mr. Carruthers, partly because Andy's intermittent chords irritated him, and partly because he really delighted in Ascher's playing, would not be denied.

"Yes, I do want it," he said. "I would like some now. No, I don't want tea for hours yet, and I won't be deserted if I hear you playing. Play the Waldstein and all the Fantasie-stücke and the Ballades and any others you can think of. I have a feeling that it will quite cure my influenza. And tell Mrs. Abercrombie that the Investigation is getting on," he added.

"All right, sir," said Ascher, with as good a grace as he could, which was not very good; for, such was his state of mind, that he did not feel in the mood even for Mrs. Abercrombie, and it was not until he was slowly and unwillingly ascending the stair at Mrs. Binnie's end that he really began to pay attention to what Mr. Carruthers had called the Incantation.

"Whatever is it?" he asked himself then.

It seemed familiar and yet unfamiliar. Now and again a subject, he was sure he knew, emerged for a few bars, and then was lost again in a maze of melodies. He paused on the landing, half unwilling to enter, half interested.

"It's like a mixture of Bach and Debussy," he said to himself. "A ridiculous mixture—but wonderfully clever. Who in the world can have put it together?"

He knocked at the door, but the playing went on un-

interruptedly. Andy, in the thick of the last stretto on the tonic pedal, was going ahead now in fine style, and it was not until she had struck the very last chord of all, that she looked up, and in the mirror opposite saw Ascher in the doorway.

Absorbed still in the music she sat looking at him in her grave way, her sombre eyes meeting his thoughtfully in the depths of the glass, while he stood still on the threshold, uncertain whether he should come in or go back. He still wore the old grey tweeds which Mrs. Abercrombie had insisted upon his keeping, and these, together with his fair hair and his colourlessness, made him look like an apparition. His sad eyes, however, were not ghostly.

"And I knew by them, somehow," Andy said to Mrs. Abercrombie afterwards, "that this must be the man you wanted me to take an interest in."

"Oh, come in," she said, rising and turning towards him, still gravely. "You are Mr. Ascher, are you not? My—Aunt—Mrs. Abercrombie told me to expect you. I am Miss Kinross."

She held out a welcoming hand, and remembered long afterwards that he hesitated before taking it.

"I beg your pardon for interrupting," he said then, however, almost brusquely, for the sight of Andy face to face had made him, for the moment, feel something akin to breathlessness.

Andy indeed, though distraught and dishevelled and robed in an old brown gown, had never looked more lovely. She was pale with fatigue, but the fire of accomplishment was in her eyes, and in every line of her the grace of absolute unselfconsciousness.

"You are not interrupting at all," she said. "I am delighted to see you. You have come in the nick of time to criticise. I was just trying over my fugue."

The word might have been a magic one. At the sound of it, the seer—the man—changed before her eyes into the musician.

"*Your* fugue?" he exclaimed, looking past her at the manuscript on the piano.

"Yes," she said, turning towards it again, "on a subject of Bach's from the Wohltemperiertes Klavier. The third in the second volume. Do you know it?"

"*Know* it?" he cried. "But do you mean to say *you* wrote it—re-wrote it I mean?"

"I have just finished it," she answered, handing it to him.

He was silent for a moment as he looked over the pencilled score in the manner of one who is well-accustomed. She watched him curiously as his glance passed from line to line, now backwards, now forwards, and, as he studied her work, she studied him, noting the slim strength of the hands that held the manuscript, the strange haggard beauty of the face bent above it, the keen intentness that had come into the tragic eyes.

"Who is he like?" she wondered. Then into her mind came the remembrance of a frontispage on which was a sketch in profile of a young war-poet.

"He's like Rupert Brooke," she decided, "only older and sadder."

Even as the thought struck her he looked up again.

"Bravo!" he said heartily. "But why not your own subject?"

"Don't you see?" she said, eagerly responding to his appreciation. "I am taking lessons direct from Bach. After tea I am going to compare it with the original."

"After tea?" exclaimed Ascher. "But won't you please do it now? Have you the score here? I can't tell you how much I shall enjoy it. Will you let me play it for you while you do your comparing?"

"Oh, thank you," said Andy, glad to see him entertained, though, truth to tell, she would have preferred to do her comparing in solitude. "It *is* good of you!" she added, endeavouring to make her voice seem cordial, as she fetched the Bach from the writing-table.

. . . . . .

"Is that Miss Kinross playing?" said Mrs. Abercrombie to Young Ellen half an hour later, when she had been informed that tea was ready.

"No, M'm, it's Mr. Ascher," said Ellen. "An' I've taken in an extry cup for he looks like's he was goin' to stay, M'm."

"Oh, he looks like's he was going to stay, does he?" said Mrs. Abercrombie, when she was alone again, addressing the photograph of Andy's Archie on the mantelpiece, while she thoughtfully adjusted a black neck-ribbon.

"Am I an old fool to keep her here, or am I not?" she demanded next. But Andy's Archie, though he looked an absolute dear, as he always had looked, did not answer her.

. . . . . .

She found her guests leaning on the piano lid, and laughing over the two scores which were spread out between them upon it.

"It's Debussified," said Ascher. "You don't mind my telling you, do you? I wonder what old Bach would have said to it."

"I know what he would have said to your playing of him anyhow," said Andy.

He looked up swiftly and met her shining eyes, then flushed with pleasure, said with a slight return of his former brusqueness—"Do you mind if I go on playing then, Miss Kinross? I was sent here really to play to Mr. Carruthers."

"Mind!" exclaimed Andy.

"Mind!" echoed Mrs. Abercrombie.

And thus, for the first time, they became aware of her presence.

"What did I tell you, Andy?" she said, after she had greeted the new-comer.

"Not half enough," said Andy. "Do let's give him tea first, so that he may get going again at the piano."

They all laughed together at this, and Ascher, protesting, was served first in spite of himself. He only drank one cup, however, and then sat down again to play. His mood, in

the short time since he had so unwillingly ascended the stair, had entirely altered. He was on the heights again—the sense of freedom was his once more, the sense of his irresponsibility, of his insignificance, and the whole seemed somehow to have been irradiated with a warmth and light that transfused everything with a strange unaccountable light-heartedness.

"I am dreaming," he kept saying to himself as he played on and on. "I am certainly dreaming. Presently I shall wake."

And then he paused at the end of an étude, sad and joyous and triumphant all in one.

"It is like a dream," said Andy suddenly, as though she had perceived his thought. "I had forgotten that there was such music."

The words came to him through the dusk from where she sat, a dim shadow near one of the windows.

"That's why—I suppose—I had the impudence to write," she added suddenly, after a moment.

"Silence!" said Mrs. Abercrombie from her seat by the fireplace. "You shall play no more, Mr. Ascher, if that is the effect you are going to produce."

Ascher laughed and sprang up.

"I must play no more to-night, anyhow," he said. "Mr. Carruthers, though he is probably quite unaware of it, has had no tea yet."

. . . . . .

"Well," said Mrs. Abercrombie when they were alone again, poking up the fire and ringing the bell at the same time. "I need not ask what you think of him, Andy."

"Oh, Aunt *Em!*" exclaimed Andy, and no more was needed.

"He gave me such splendid tips too about that fugue of mine," she added presently, "that I feel I must re-write it to-night from the beginning to the end. Shall you mind?"

"Mind? Not a bit," said Mrs. Abercrombie, "but, before you begin it, I insist that you go out with me for a walk.

There's a moon, and the wind has fallen, and you'll do your work the better for it."

They walked therefore after dinner quite a long way down the road, but Andy—for a brilliant girl—was a surprisingly dull companion. She said "Yes," when Mrs. Abercrombie asked her if the moon were not lovely, and "Yes," again when she drew her attention to the Japanesey effect of a bare branch athwart it.

"If I had been—anybody else—I would have been bored to death," soliloquised her future aunt. "I wonder how Archie—But of course he has never seen her fugue-possessed," she reminded herself.

This thought lent a piquancy to the situation that it had lacked, and a wonder and a mystery, and made the walk quite interesting, though all that Andy said on the way back from the milestone where they turned, till they came to the Dove-cote again, was,

"Aunt Em—isn't that moon lovely?"

. . . . . .

As they came near the door a tall figure passed them in the dimness, coming away from the Dove-cote, and no sooner had Mrs. Abercrombie reached her room, and taken off her cloak, than there was a knock at the door.

In answer to her "Come in!" Ellen entered.

"Bob Lindsay's jist been here, M'm," she announced, "an' I jist thocht I would like to tell ye that it's all settled, and we're to be cried on Sunday and mairried on the Monday."

"But my good Ellen," exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie, startled. "Have you considered——"

"No, M'm, I've considered naething," replied Young Ellen, "for the mair I consider the mair trouble I get intil. If I had considered less it would ha' been better for me. I've made up my mind never to consider ony mair. Guid nicht an' thenk ye kindly, M'm, for a' ye've done."

"But it seems I have done nothing," said Mrs. Abercrombie, conscience-stricken, as she heard the bride-elect go

into her room and bang the door. She did it with an air of finality evidently calculated to show not only decision, but satisfaction with that decision.

It, however, by no means satisfied Mrs. Abercrombie, and not being one of those who on such occasions keep themselves to themselves, she determined to seek out Mrs. Binnie.

As she went softly downstairs not to attract Young Ellen's attention, she remembered other crises of the same kind at which she had assisted.

"Only they were mostly *after* marriage," she reminded herself, "when everything is so much more complicated. All that this needs is merely a little smoothing out. Ellen is a born old maid, and that is the short and the long of it."

With these thoughts still in her mind she entered the open door of the kitchen, expecting to find Mrs. Binnie there, settling things up for the night. To her immense surprise, however, the only occupant was a stout figure in a grey overcoat, standing with his back to her and engrossed apparently in the clock. He was humming to himself something under his breath, which had neither time nor tune, and was twisting a soft hat, which he held in both hands behind his back, in a nervous manner.

"Mr. Dunwiddie!" she exclaimed, but remembering even in her surprise to exclaim softly.

The grocer wheeled and confronted her.

"Yes, M'm," he said. "It's me. I've been thinkin' things over and settled in my mind that it's not my place to retire from the affair we was speakin' about this morning, M'm, but Bob Lindsay's."

After he had pronounced the word Lindsay, he compressed his lips upon it in a determined manner.

"You are quite right, Mr. Dunwiddie," said Mrs. Abercrombie with enthusiasm, before she remembered the latest development of the affair.

Then, however, her face fell.

"But are you aware," she added, "that the engagement

with Bob Lindsay is now quite settled? and that—in short—he has just left the house?"

"Yes, M'm, I am aware," said Mr. Dunwoodie, darkly. "I saw him pass, shakin' his fist up at my house, though he never saw me—and it was that, M'm, that settled me. Mrs. Abercrombie, M'm, it's a thing I will not stand, to have the minister told when he comes back that I, bein' what I am, was feared to mairry Ellen because an impident young neer-do-weel said afore a' the place that, if I did, he would pit me through my bacon-slicer. Mrs. Abercrombie, M'm, I've come to say to-night that—come what may—I *will* mairry Ellen."

As his excitement rose, his voice rose also.

"Oh, hush!" said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Don't let Ellen hear you yet—where can Mrs. Binnie be?"

Even as she spoke, as though in answer to her question, Old Ellen, carrying a candle and a bundle of linen, entered.

She had been celebrating the engagement by looking through the linen-press in the attic where all the best linen was kept and deciding upon which items thereof could be spared for Young Ellen. She had brought down the table-cloth too for the wedding-feast, a fine hand-made one, an heir-loom, which only saw the light at great functions.

Mrs. Abercrombie always afterwards remembered with admiration how, under those circumstances, Mrs. Binnie received Mr. Dunwiddie. There was both presence of mind and diplomacy in her handling of the situation.

That Peter should be there at that hour, of course, must mean something unusual. Either he must have heard of the engagement and have come to offer his congratulations, or he must not yet have heard of it and have come to press his own suit. In the latter contingency it would be regrettable should he be altogether silenced, Young Ellen being at the present moment in floods of tears upstairs, and this belated admirer so much the better match.

"Weel, Peter?" she said, coming forward to the table, and

laying down her armful of linen. "Weel, Peter?" nothing more.

It was quite sufficient.

"Mrs. Binnie," said Peter, standing very stiff and very straight, "I'm sorry to trouble ye so late but my business'll no' keep. I hear that yer niece Ellen, than whom a better young woman never stepped, is to mairry Bob Lindsay o' Broadlees an' I've come in to see if that's the case."

"Weel, Peter," said Mrs. Binnie again, "whatever she may ha' been driven till, she's no' mairried yet, and at this present moment she is in her bed up the stair greetin' fit to break her heart. Mak' what ye like o' that."

"I will," said Mr. Dunwiddie resolutely. "Will ye ask her to come doon, an' I'll pit it to her afore witnesses whether she wants me or Bob?"

"Shall I go, too?" said Mrs. Abercrombie, tactfully, when Mrs. Binnie had gone away on her errand.

"No, if ye please, M'm," said Peter. "I'll tak' nae risks this time. I'll ha' twa witnesses."

"And there he stood," Mrs. Abercrombie related afterwards, "as though he were ready to cope with anything. He ought to have had his portrait taken. There would have been time for it too, that impossible Ellen took such ages coming."

The sound of subdued arguing indeed went on and on upstairs, till Mrs. Abercrombie, unable to bear Peter's suspense any longer, went up herself, and arrived breathless in Ellen's room.

She found her still in bed and in tears, and Mrs. Binnie in desperation.

"Very weel, Ellen," she was just saying. "I'll jist ha' to gang doon an' say guid nicht to him then."

"You will do nothing of the sort," said Mrs. Abercrombie, appearing behind her. "Get up this minute, Ellen!"

"I'll no' see him," said Ellen, sobbing. "He's jist doin' this to spite Bob an' show the place that he's no' feared o' him. Tell him he's ower late, an' it's a' settled."

"He shall be told nothing of the sort," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Settled! Do you call this settled? You have done nothing but weep so far as I have heard, ever since you were engaged to Bob, and even if your aunt would permit you to marry him I utterly refuse to do so—whether it is my business or not, at least until you have seen Mr. Dunwiddie."

After that, according to Mrs. Abercrombie, everything simply went like clock-work, and, if no engagement took place between Mr. Dunwiddie and Ellen that night, they at least declared themselves unequivocally, and Ellen promised to disentangle herself as soon as might be from Bob, who, she said, had forced her into the engagement when she was in low spirits. It was also arranged that, this necessary preliminary over, there would be no more talk of weddings till Bob was safely off to France. Then, however, come what might—as Mr. Dunwiddie repeated holding the still weeping Ellen by the hand—he would make her his wife.

After this last speech, showing a fine sense of dramatic fitness and appreciation of climax Mr. Dunwiddie left, and Mrs. Abercrombie, feeling that she had done her part and was now de trop, also made her exit.

Following a natural impulse to share her experience, she was in the sitting-room before she remembered the fugue fiend.

He was there before her, however, and in full possession.

Andy never so much as looked up.

Her hostess tested her in various ways. She poked the fire, brought out refreshments, creaked the cupboard door, shut and opened drawers.

"No—so long as I do not play the piano or burst into song I shall be to her as though I were not," she said to herself at last.

"Which is a great comfort," she added, as she sank into her accustomed chair. "To be absolutely non-existent is to be free. I shall tell Archie that."

She took up her book and her knitting then, and sat on

in comfortable silence, till, still in silence and still unnoticed, she went off to bed.

After the shutting of her door the whole house seemed to sink from hour to hour into ever deeper rest.

Two of its inhabitants, however, unknown to each other, kept watch till morning. Andy working on demon-driven, and Ascher, who could *not* sleep. . . .

CHAPTER IX

IN WHICH THE FUGUE DEMON TAKES AN EIGHT HOURS' REST, AND MRS. ABERCROMBIE RETURNS THE CALL OF MR. CARRUTHERS

It was Andy who appeared first at the eight-o'clock breakfast-table. She looked surprised when her hostess exclaimed in horror at finding her seated there.

"Fool that I am!" Mrs. Abercrombie exclaimed, "I forgot last night to give orders, that you were not to be called."

"Oh, please don't mind," laughed Andy. "I had three hours' sleep, and that, with a hot bath and a cold sponge after it, is quite sufficient."

Mrs. Abercrombie shook her head despairingly.

"Did you finish the fugue?" she asked.

"Yes—and it has finished me," replied Andy. "At least for to-day. I haven't an idea in my head. I shall simply slack all the time and talk to you if you will let me."

"You dear thing!" cried Mrs. Abercrombie, clapping her hands delightedly. "I am enchanted to hear you say so. I shall be charmed to have you—*you*—and not the demon—beside me, even if only for one day. I was beginning to feel eerie with the demon."

At this Andy gravely laid down her coffee-cup, and leaned her folded arms on the table.

"Dear Aunt Em," she said, "you see now what I mean, don't you? I am glad you have seen. Now you will be able to judge."

"My dear," said Mrs. Abercrombie, returning her grave

look steadily, "I can't judge yet. Wait till I have seen you in one of your off-times first."

There was a pause before Andy spoke.

"You *are* a comfort, Aunt Em," she said then, quietly. "You are so absolutely honest. You would tell me straight what you thought, wouldn't you, even if you knew that it would hurt me—or—or Archie?"

"I am afraid I would have to, Andy," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "I am made like that, you see. I wouldn't be able to help myself."

"And my Archie is very much to you?" Andy went on, watching her.

"More than any, save one, has ever been," said Mrs. Abercrombie, her brown eyes softening.

"Then," said Andy, "I leave it all to you, Aunt Em. I have thought and thought till I can think no more."

She swept back the dusky hair from her forehead.

"Oh, I am thankful I came!" she added.

With these words she rose, and, before Mrs. Abercrombie had realised what was going to happen, the girl's arms were round her neck, and her warm cheek was pressed to hers.

"Aunt Em—dear Aunt Em," she whispered, "I am so glad I have you—I am so glad."

"My dear," said Mrs. Abercrombie, much moved, "I hope you will always have reason to be glad. God knows I want to do the very best that is in my power to do for you and Archie."

They hugged each other close for a moment, and shed a tear or two together. Then, by tacit consent, the little ebullition was over. Andy returned to her seat, and both of them to their breakfasts, and the rest of the meal went merrily.

As on the night of the arrival, they vied with each other in keeping the ball of conversation rolling, and this exercise, by unconscious degrees, put them into an adventurous and lightsome mood.

It was lovely weather, and, to the consternation of the

two Ellens, who had never heard of such a thing being done at such a time of year, they took their lunch out with them, and had it near a little amber stream, that wandered, as though it had lost its way, through the middle of a wood. They gathered sticks and made a fire and talked of everything in heaven and on the earth.

Neither of them will ever forget that day—a summer's day set in the midst of winter, vivid with russet beech-leaves and scarlet hips and emerald moss. Dusk found them seated on a fallen tree-trunk, and still talking.

"Let's have tea here too," exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie. "I feel as though I could never leave this place. It is, as Browning would have said, aware, of all that has happened here . . . of these tall, clean grey stems of the beeches that have grown up here to be the splendid giants they are; of the moss that through slow ages has been spreading this wonderful carpet; of the myriads of leaves that have been born and have died here; of the dawns and sunsets, noons and midnights here, that no mortal eyes have looked upon; of the songs of birds and sighing winds and winter blasts that have been heard by no human being. . . . No wonder it is aware! Through hundreds of years it has come to be a shrine more full than any cathedral of memories of beautiful things. . . . Must we leave it now when it is all so perfect? Couldn't we wait to see how it looks at night? . . . We have two buns left and the gingerbread."

But Andy, who had responded, and more, all day to everything, did not respond this time.

"Is it tea-time?" she said, slipping down from her place on the tree-trunk. "Well, I'm sorry, Aunt Em, but I am afraid I must get back again now."

"But how stodgy of you!" cried Mrs. Abercrombie. "Are you cold, then, or bored or what?"

"I am perfectly happy," laughed Andy. "But I have my letter to Archie to write yet before Mr. Ascher——"

"Of course, I had forgotten," said Mrs. Abercrombie, sighing. "He is coming to see your fugue."

"And to play I hope," said Andy. "I can't tell you how much his playing helps me."

"Helps the demon you mean," said Mrs. Abercrombie, ruefully. "Well, I suppose it's the turn of the demon again. I can't complain either, I have had a good innings."

They packed up then, and presently they moved off homewards. It was almost dark when they reached the village street. Lights glowed here and there in the scattered houses. The wood beyond was dim like a grey mist.

"How strange it is," said Andy softly, "to think of what is going on outside this quiet place, the strife—the agony —we are cut off in here—between the woods. Here nothing but the shadows of things can trouble us."

Mrs. Abercrombie nodded but she did not speak. Her heart had become unaccountably heavy. One of her fits of depression was upon her, and, tracing it back to its beginning, she found that she had been unconsciously warding it off all day, ever since the morning and Andy's little ebullition.

There had been something strangely touching in the girl's confidence and self-abandonment, something that smote her, too, with a sense of her own unfitness.

"It's a shame," she said to herself, "that her happiness and Archie's should depend on the judgment of an old incompetent."

This thought became so strong in her and made her so miserable, that when she reached her own room the first thing she did was to kneel down at her bedside.

"O God!" she said, burying her face in the quilt, "do Thou Who art so high that all the future is plain to Thee, lighten my darkness, for Christ's sake."

She felt better after this, and, when she had changed and established herself in the sitting-room where the lamp was lighted and tea ready, she had quite recovered.

After tea they both wrote letters to Archie.

Andy's was the longer letter. A vague remorse had possession of her. She remembered how short and per-

functory her note of the day before had been. In the quiet of the wood all day long, too, her thoughts had been turning to her soldier lover, and on her return she had found a letter from him, scribbled in pencil, all but illegible.

"My darling," it ran, "I have only time now to say again I love you—love you—love you, and that the thought of you in your quiet room, spinning your magic webs of music, goes with me everywhere, through thick and thin.

"When to dream of you is so wonderful—what will it be to see you again, to have, to hold you? . . .

"I dare not think of it now. It seems too good to be true. ARCHIE."

"The wood reminded me of you," she wrote. "Strange, was it not? when your work is war and it was all so peaceful, but to me your heart is like the wood—filled with the things I love—dear familiar things—and always there to receive your wild bird however far afield she may have flown from you."

Even as she wrote these words, however, her critical faculty awoke within her. She realised the conceit, the utter selfishness of this point of view.

"How dare I write to him like this?" she said to herself, "when perhaps at this very moment he is meeting danger, perhaps death? I talk as though it were a privilege for him to stand and wait my pleasure, when in reality I am not fit to black his boots."

She tore up what she had written, and began again on another sheet, while Mrs. Abercrombie, apparently absorbed in her own thoughts, watched her.

"She is having difficulties too," she said to herself, as she continued her own letter.

"I have had a great day with your Andy," she wrote. "She is a charming girl, and I don't wonder you are in love with her. She is one of the best comrades I have ever met, and you know that is saying much. I say it too, even after

a day spent—all yesterday—in her company hardly exchanging a remark. This was not because we had quarrelled, but because her Demon had possession of her—you know what I mean—her genius—her power of taking pains—or whatever it is that does take possession of her. She was for nearly twenty-four hours—twenty-four hours, my dear—absorbed in her work. You will have to reckon with this, my Archie. During those demoniac times you will be non-existent, or existent only as an imperceptible wraith coming and going in her presence unnoticed. That is what I was yesterday, and I confess that, though I had been used to artists, it gave me an eerie feeling. But to-day I have got over it, and so will you, my dear, if ever you suffer from it, which probably you won't. In the off-times she is so charming, so affectionate, so delightful in every way, that she far more than makes up for the intermediate lapses, and I tell you, Archie, that I would rather have her with me now, though she never spoke to me again till Doomsday, than any other girl I know of."

She had to pause here as something had gone wrong with her pen, and, before she began writing again, she read over what she had written. "You will have to delete," she soliloquised before she had read three sentences. "Surely he has more than enough on his mind just now, in full career after Germans, without these metaphysics."

Therefore she tore up her letter too, and wrote another all about Young Ellen and her complicated love-affairs, which made Archie, when he received it, shriek with laughter. All she said about Andy was in two sentences at the end.

"She is a dear girl," she said, "one of the dearest girls that ever lived; but you can't love her too much. She will need all your love."

Andy was still writing, and when she had finished addressing her envelope Mrs. Abercrombie took up the morning's paper, which was still lying unopened on the table, and at once became absorbed in it.

"Listen to this, Andy," she said presently. "Just think what these unutterable cads have done now. They have been beaten back beyond Valenciennes, but before they left it they smashed all the lace-machines—smashed them—made them useless. Even if they had taken them with them one could have pardoned it."

"They seem to have been trying all along," said Andy, as she folded up her letter, "to make themselves unpardonable."

"And they have succeeded," said Mrs. Abercrombie.

"More than succeeded," said Andy; "and they have taught us to hate too. I for one did not know what it meant before this war. Now I can both hate and loathe. It is a strange lesson they have taught me."

They were sitting with their backs to the door, but here some slight sound made them turn towards it.

"Mr. Ascher!" they exclaimed together.

"When did you come in?" said Mrs. Abercrombie. "I did not hear you."

"You were reading aloud," he said hoarsely. "I did not wish to interrupt."

He was pale as death and his lips were trembling.

"It's hearing about the war," said Mrs. Abercrombie to herself, and as she tossed away the paper, she took the opportunity of being turned away from Ascher to grimace warningly at Andy. At the same time she exclaimed aloud—

"But we are delighted to be interrupted. We have been looking forward all day to hearing you play again. Haven't we, Andy?"

"Oh—I—I don't think I can play to-night," said Ascher. "I—Mr. Carruthers wants me—I just came to tell you I couldn't play."

"Then we reply that we don't believe you," said Mrs. Abercrombie, determined not to allow him to go away before it was absolutely necessary, for his face was just

as it had been on that first night. "We can't let you go. Can we, Andy?" she persisted.

"No," Andy joined in. "Most certainly not, Mr. Ascher. Do you know I sat up all last night—didn't I, Aunt Em?—to rewrite that fugue for you."

At this, a faint flush rose in his ghastly cheeks, the set lines about his mouth relaxed a little.

"You sat up?" he said—incredulously.

"I wasn't in bed till five," said Andy, "and working hard all the time carrying out your suggestions. And now—oh, you *are* disappointing!"

"Ah, but the fugue is different. I can wait for that," he said. "May I play your score this time while you watch the Bach?"

In five minutes they were absorbed, while Mrs. Abercrombie, surreptitiously taking up her paper, went on reading peacefully. When after about three-quarters of an hour, however, they were still at counterpoint, with no sign of coming to a conclusion, and every sign on the contrary of going on till midnight, the remembrance of Mr. Carruthers began to trouble her.

"Does James really want him?" she asked herself, and it worried her to think of James, convalescent and alone, listening, perhaps in irritation and misery, to these detached subjects and counter-subjects. At last, unable to stand the thought of him any longer, she rose and slipped out, as she expected, unnoticed. . . .

In the kitchen she found Mrs. Binnie and Ellen seated, knitting, apparently in subdued mood. Both rose as she entered.

"I am going over to return Mr. Carruthers's call," she said. "If Miss Kinross asks for me tell her where I have gone."

"Very good, M'm," said Mrs. Binnie.

Young Ellen did not answer.

She had evidently been weeping copiously.

"Well, Niobe," said Mrs. Abercrombie, "how goes the Affair? You do not seem to be very happy yet."

"No, M'm, I am not," said Ellen, accepting and indeed not noticing her new name, so engaged was she in blinking back more tears. "I've just told Bob, M'm, and he took it so well it near broke my heart."

"But I should have thought you would have been glad," said Mrs. Abercrombie.

"So I am, M'm, so I am," said Ellen; "but Bob took it that well and I am that sorry for him—that's what it is."

"It's a great pity," said Mrs. Abercrombie to Mrs. Binnie, who came as escort with her as far as the door of Mr. Carruthers's end, "that poor Ellen cannot marry them both. She seems to regret the one just as much as the other. Did Bob really take it as well as she says?"

"Yes, M'm, strange to say," said Mrs. Binnie. "I was there, for she was feared to tell him—but he took it like a lamb, an' said good-bye then, for he wouldna see her again afore he went to France, for he thocht it would be better no. He spoke like a book, M'm. I wouldna ha' believed it unless I had heard it. A' the same," concluded Mrs. Binnie, as, on Mr. Carruthers's doorstep, she took her leave, "there will be nae weddin' or talk o' weddin' till he's safe awa' if I can help it."

. . . . . .

Mr. Carruthers was sitting in the writing-room when Mrs. Abercrombie looked in, crumpled up in the one chair, with a large volume upon his knees. Observing him closely, however, she saw that he was not reading, but gazing out over the printed page into the glowing depths of the fire.

"He looks as though he were just thinking near the surface like an ordinary person," said Mrs. Abercrombie to herself, and he must have been doing so, for, at her first word, he looked up and rose to greet her. He even had the presence of mind to offer her the one chair, but she

had already established herself on Ascher's pile of books. She waved him into his seat again.

"No, no," she said. "You are still an invalid and I am not going to stay. I merely came to apologise."

"Indeed?" said Mr. Carruthers. "May I not offer you a cigarette?"

"He is positively human to-night," thought Mrs. Abercrombie.

Aloud she said—

"Certainly, thank you, James, if it will not bore you to have a talk."

"I want a talk," said Mr. Carruthers, while she made her selection from his case. "I want to know for one thing what you have been doing with my assistant."

"With your assistant?" she exclaimed. "You mean Mr. Ascher?"

"Yes," said Mr. Carruthers; "an extraordinary change has come over him since he left me yesterday afternoon in response to your—incantation."

"But it wasn't mine," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "It wasn't really an incantation at all—it was only Andy playing her fugue over."

"Oh, Andy is the name, is it?" said James sourly. "I had not heard it before. I have heard a great deal nevertheless. Who in the name of sense is she?"

Mrs. Abercrombie laughed.

"Another musician like himself," she replied.

"So I gathered," said Mr. Carruthers. "But is that all she is?"

"By no means," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "She is quite beautiful. I think Beatrice must have been like her, and Juliet, and Isabella. Also—in the intervals of composition—she is one of the most companionable and charming of girls. Incidentally—in case it may be of interest to you, James—she has just become engaged to my favourite nephew."

"Ah!" said James suddenly. There was no mistaking the tone of the exclamation.

Mrs. Abercrombie laughed again.

"You seem pleased," she said.

"I have reason to be," he replied. "I know by experience that there is nothing like an unhappy love affair for making a man stick in to his work."

"Or give it up altogether," suggested Mrs. Abercrombie.

"Oh, that will be only temporary," said Mr. Carruthers, lighting another cigarette. "He will get over that."

Mrs. Abercrombie was silent for a moment, regarding her companion curiously, as one might gaze from a new standpoint at a familiar object. She noted with fresh interest his unkempt look, his rusty clothes, his shabby slippers.

"I wonder who she was," she said to herself, "who taught him that."

Then an indistinct sound of the piano from next door recalled her to the subject in hand.

"I do not pretend not to understand you, James," she said. "But are you not rather jumping to conclusions?"

"No, I am deducing from observations," said James.

"Then you gather——"

"I gather," said Mr. Carruthers, "that your future niece is like her future aunt."

"Flatterer!" said Mrs. Abercrombie.

"And that Ascher," Mr. Carruthers went on, "that Ascher——"

"Is likely to be susceptible," Mrs. Abercrombie finished for him.

Mr. Carruthers nodded gravely.

"Which—if your Andy had been likely to be susceptible too—might have meant calamity," he added suddenly.

"I see your point of view, James," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "But, pardon me for saying so, I think it an unkind one. I gather—you see I am using your word—that you

think the Investigation should outweigh all other considerations."

"I do," said Mr. Carruthers emphatically. "Most certainly I do."

"So that, even if Andy had been free to fall in love with him, you would have disapproved of any close personal relation between her and Ascher?" said Mrs. Abercrombie.

To her surprise James started up, and sat uncrumpled and erect before her.

"Most certainly I would," he exclaimed, glaring at her in a kind of consternation. "Close personal relation? Nothing would have induced me to allow it."

"Then it is fortunate that there will be no need for you to worry about it," said Mrs. Abercrombie, wondering at his excitement. "I was merely supposing the case for the sake of argument."

"Don't suppose it, don't suppose it," said Mr. Carruthers.

"I won't then," said Mrs. Abercrombie, shrugging her shoulders and flicking away the subject with the ashes from her cigarette. "But," she paused for a moment, "you make me curious. You talk as though Ascher——"

"I have nothing whatever against Ascher," said Mr. Carruthers hastily.

"Then your objection to his being happy would be solely on account of the Investigation, James?" said Mrs. Abercrombie.

"And would not that be reason enough?" cried Mr. Carruthers. "Here am I on the verge of the Discovery—having even in a—Memory *heard* the language of the script——"

"Oh, James," exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie. "*Heard* it? Are you sure?"

"As sure as that you are sitting there," cried the Investigator. "All I need is security from interruption, tangible and intangible—especially the latter—and here I am beset—*beset,* I tell you, with all kinds of distractions simply

because of the proximity of this Andy of yours. Since he met her, Ascher has been practically useless."

"Oh, you are imagining this, James," said Mrs. Abercrombie incredulously.

"Pardon me, I am not," replied the Investigator. "Since last night he has had no regard for anything. He has allowed all manner of interruptions to pass, from perturbing suggestions down to Mrs. Binnie herself. Now, however, what you have told me gives me some hope that this torment will soon be over, and that in the end it may prove a blessing in disguise, by clinching him to me and the Investigation for the remainder of his present existence."

"Poor Ascher!" soliloquised Mrs. Abercrombie, but aloud she said—"Well for your sake, James, and for the sake of the Investigation, I hope so."

She received no answer to this speech, and presently feeling that she herself had become, or was about to become, an interruption, she took her departure.

As she emerged from the doorway she heard the other door shut, and footsteps approaching along the gravel path. Not being disposed, however, to meet Ascher at that moment, she withdrew behind a laurel-bush until he had passed.

"You did not manage to make him play?" she said to Andy, whom she found closing the piano.

"No—he was rather strange to-night," said Andy.

But she said no more, and Mrs. Abercrombie did not question her.

. . . . . .

At that moment, however, in the writing-room through the wall, another conversation was taking place.

"I am afraid I have been away too long, sir," said Ascher, entering. "I was asked to look over a—a fugue—and that detained me longer than I expected."

"A fugue?" said Mr. Carruthers. "Written by the young musician you spoke of?"

"Yes," said Ascher.

"Any good?" asked Mr. Carruthers.

"Quite a brilliant piece of work," said Ascher.

"She may go far then, may she—this girl?"

"Very far, sir," said Ascher shortly.

"It's a pity she's a woman," said James.

To this there was no answer.

"Women's success depends so much upon the men they marry," Mr. Carruthers went on. "Won't you sit down, Ascher?"

Ascher sat down.

"It's to be hoped that this girl's fiancé appreciates her," Mr. Carruthers continued. "It is fortunately almost certain that he does—since he is an Abercrombie. Mrs. Abercrombie has just told me that he is her favourite nephew."

"Oh, then—that will be all right, sir!" said Ascher quietly.

"Quite all right," said Mr. Carruthers. "I was very pleased to hear it. What you had told me last night about Miss—about Miss——"

"Kinross?" prompted Ascher.

"Kinross," repeated James, "interested me very much; but, until I heard this to-night, I was sorry for her. Women's success, as I have said, depends so much on other things. Only a man can ever find full satisfaction in his work."

. . . . . .

With these words Mr. Carruthers ended his references to Andy, and neither of the two men spoke of her again that night. This was not because of the Investigation, however, which progressed no whit.

Mr. Carruthers afterwards described his state of mind as being like that of a man, who, finding his skiff caught in a rapid, knows that all he can do is to sit tight, and wait till it emerges into smooth water again.

Ascher, working all evening at making extracts from some library books, which had to be returned on the following

day, did not attempt to describe his state of mind even to himself, and could not have done so if he had.

The truth is that his mental condition that night could not have been correctly described as a state at all. Changes had been taking place in it from moment to moment, ever since the opening of the door of Mrs. Abercrombie's sitting-room.

He had gone over to the Other End almost in buoyant mood. All day the thought of going had been at the back of his consciousness, setting his whole being quietly astir and aglow with anticipation. The evening before had been but a foretaste, a wonderful revelation to himself of his power to give Andy pleasure. To-night he had determined should be a revelation to *her*. He would summon down the gods for her. It was while he was thinking out a programme, which should lead from enchantment to enchantment, that Mrs. Binnie passed through the cordon of his attention, and penetrating to the inner sanctuary asked, please what did Mr. Carruthers want for dinner, for Mr. Ascher had never come over to order anything. . . . New vistas should open before Andy's sombre eyes. As one might take a latent artist into a gallery of masterpieces, so would he conduct this girl with all her powers and possibilities into the very vestibule of heaven, whence she might look down upon her past achievement, and, seeing it as it was, then soar perhaps to heights undreamed of.

It was this thought, he told himself, this anticipation, this hope, that made him long all day for the passing of the hours, made him take at last even to counting the minutes.

But, with the opening of the sitting-room door, all had come to nothing at the sound of Mrs. Abercrombie's voice, at the grave finality of Andy's answer. He had known in that moment that it would be impossible for him to play, that the gods who, up to that time, had seemed so near, were now far beyond his summoning.

Who was he that he should summon them, or think of leading this beautiful girl in her soft red gown—he had

not known before that she was so beautiful—into anywhere, however heavenly? Was he not one of the unutterable cads whom she had learned to hate and loathe?

"I am one of them," he had almost cried out in his despair and anguish. "I am one of them."

The fugue had changed this mood however. Andy's warm and unrestrained admiration for his superior skill was as balm to his wounded spirit, while her keen perception, ever anticipating his thought, acted upon his interest like a powerful stimulant. These together brought him to the point of sitting down to the piano again, after he had risen on the conclusion of the counterpoint lesson, with the idea in his mind of beginning his programme after all, when Andy, totally absorbed again, totally inhuman for the time being, laid her hand suddenly on his shoulder and said—

"Oh, *do* wait just a moment!"

He did wait, and it was a moment of moments.

Again he was transformed. The musician was as though he had never been, and in his place was some one unknown to him, thrilling, soul and body, to that light touch on his shoulder. For one moment only, however—the next his heart's blood seemed to freeze suddenly at the source, before it went coursing wildly on again, as Andy said—

"Are you *sure* you like that sequence?"

He had answered at random and come away then, without playing his programme, almost without saying good-bye.

"I can never see her again. I am a German, I am a German," he was saying in an agony to himself all along the gravel path. At the end of his journey, however, Mr. Carruthers's announcement of Andy's engagement had brought him a queer kind of relief. "I shall play to her to-morrow," he was thinking as he copied out notes about forgotten kings and queens; "like some wandering minstrel she has stopped in passing, outside her palace gates—I shall play to her."

CHAPTER X

IN WHICH MR. CARRUTHERS, BEING PREVENTED FROM CONCENTRATING IT UPON THE RUINS OF KNOSSOS, TURNS HIS ATTENTION TO THE DOUBLE-BARRING AND COMPLETE SECURING OF OTHER PALACE GATES

WHILE Ascher, in a strange dream-like serenity for which he did not attempt to account, finished his notes and then went to bed and slept, it was far otherwise with Mr. Carruthers. The unhappy Investigator, supposed by his assistant to be comfortably settled for the night, had in reality never been less settled. If he had been beset before he saw Mrs. Abercrombie, he was now submerged in the seething mass of thoughts evolved by his present mental apparatus which, for the moment, had got out of hand altogether. The interruption from without had generated interruptions within, and the latter, like traitors in the camp, were the worst foes he had to face.

"I shall go off my head altogether if this continues," he said to himself, as he turned his pillow for the twenty-fifth time.

Presently, however, he sat up in bed, and, to his great relief, he was able in this position to select from the jumble, making for dementia, one practicable idea, which he proceeded to consider at some length. As three o'clock struck he came to a conclusion.

"Mrs. Abercrombie is a very good judge," he said aloud, "and she says the girl is like Beatrice and Juliet and Isabella all in one. If so, she'll stand it."

Then he began to consider details.

This process was long also, involving more turning of

pillows and the smoking of several cigarettes. By the time the cocks began to crow in the village, however, his thinking was finished and his plan of action made.

When Ascher, the unconscious cause of all the disturbance, entered in the morning, he found his chief peacefully asleep, with no sign anywhere of his nocturnal conflict, except a few cigarette-ends and a strong smell of tobacco-smoke.

According to orders he did not wake him, but went on with his own breakfast and his usual morning tasks, giving to the writing-room some semblance of order, and consulting with Young Ellen about the day's arrangements. This done, and no sign of life yet coming from the bedroom, he began with pencil and paper to make out his programme for the coming evening, seated in the one chair drawn up to the window whence could be seen the encircling woods.

As he sat there with the calm of the night before still upon him, deeper and deeper realisation came to him of his wonderful good fortune in finding Andy and her strange wild music, here, now, when all happiness, all expectation of happiness, had seemed done and over.

A vision rose before him of her as she had been the evening before, leaning by him on the piano with the Bach score in front of her, and her absorbed gaze meeting his from time to time in absolute unconsciousness of everything but counterpoint.

"No other girl would have been any good to me," he said to himself. "But she might be a boy. What a comrade she is! No more like other girls——"

He remembered one and another.

"And an artist—a student to her finger-tips—even a genius perhaps—who knows?"

He sat pondering—thinking of passages in the fugue of that night.

"I shouldn't wonder," he said to himself.

It was a great thought. It was as though a jewel-expert

condemned to confinement for life, and passing on his way to prison, should have come upon some exquisite gem in his path, and have been permitted a moment's space to look at it, to hold it in his hand, to recognise, to appreciate it. . . .

"God, and I can help her too!" he exulted. "She shall be the better for my passing."

In the absorption of that moment, it is no wonder that he did not see Mr. Carruthers appear fully dressed in the doorway, nor hear him shortly thereafter go downstairs and leave the house.

But Mr. Carruthers had been more observant than his assistant that morning, and, while he was dressing, had seen Mrs. Abercrombie leave the Other End, and set off with a string-bag full of parcels on her arm, in a business-like manner, for some unknown destination. He had watched her disappear round a bend in the road, beyond which he knew that there was no inhabited house within three miles. Then quickly completing his toilet by making a futile attempt to smooth his hair, and convincing himself that his hat was lost, he also took the road.

His destination was not so remote as Mrs. Abercrombie's, however, being no further distant than the Other End, and in a wonderfully short space of time he had evaded the vigilance of both the Ellens, and ascended the stairs to the sitting-room, where Andy was just settling down to work.

It is probable that a quarter of an hour later he would have received no answer to his knock. As things were, however, it was duly answered, and he was received and seated.

Before this was done, however, he had introduced himself, and Andy, though in some wrath at being interrupted, was interested at once.

"How kind of you to come to see me," she said, wondering, when she had assured herself that the visit was not for Mrs. Abercrombie.

Mr. Carruthers drew his chair closer to the table.

"I had to come," he said. "I can assure you I did not want to, much as I am interested"—he glanced towards the music-paper, upon which a fugue-subject was already written—"in you and your studies."

"And I in yours," said Andy eagerly, even as she wondered more and more. "Mrs. Abercrombie has told me a little about the Investigation. It must be fascinating work."

"You think so?" said Mr. Carruthers.

"I do indeed," said Andy.

"Yet you are persistently interrupting it just now," said Mr. Carruthers unexpectedly.

Andy stared. Then, thinking she had solved the mystery—

"Ah, I see," she said. "I am so sorry—my piano has been disturbing you."

"Not a bit," said Mr. Carruthers. "It's not the piano. It's the thought of *you.*"

"The thought of *me?*" exclaimed Andy, completely mystified. Then leaning her elbows on the table, she added gravely, with a slight frown between her eyebrows—"Would you mind telling me plainly, Mr. Carruthers, what you are talking about?"

Mr. Carruthers smiled grimly.

"You'll do," he said to himself. "You may be Beatrice and Juliet and Isabella, but you're a young woman of the present day as well."

All this time he kept on smiling.

"Is he a little mad?" thought Andy.

She said no word, however, only she glanced for a moment towards her manuscript, and James noted the glance.

"I must not waste more of your time," he said; "and believe me it is against my will that I have come at all. But I could not settle to my own work, before I had had a few words with you about my assistant."

"Your assistant?" said Andy surprised. "Do you mean Mr. Ascher?"

"Yes—he has been working with you he tells me," said Mr. Carruthers.

"He has been very kind," said Andy. "He knows simply everything about composition, and as for his playing——"

Her whole face lit up at the remembrance. James, watching her, was surprised and touched. Also he found it difficult to proceed.

"Is it that I have been taking up too much of his time?" asked Andy after a moment.

Mr. Carruthers smiled grimly again as he thought of Ascher as he had last seen him, and as he probably was at that moment, sitting at his window—idle and dream-smitten.

"No, not that either," he said; "if he is any good to you. It is a pleasure to him I know to help you. But there is something which has been worrying me, and which I think you ought to be told before you—before you see more of him. . . . Miss Kinross, Ascher, though he is my friend—and though there is no one I admire more—is not what he seems to you to be. He is—by my fault I must tell you—for my sake—living here under false pretences."

"Under false pretences?" repeated Andy very low.

"Not by his own desire, remember," Mr. Carruthers added hastily. "By mine. You know what a help he can be to you. He is infinitely more to me. I feel that with him beside me there is some chance of my seeing the Investigation through—otherwise——"

Mr. Carruthers spread out his hands expressively.

"I see," said Andy slowly. Then suddenly she added—"Does Mrs. Abercrombie know?"

"No," said Mr. Carruthers, "and I must ask you not to say anything of this to Mrs. Abercrombie. I am an old friend of hers, as you know, and I will take the responsibility. There is no need for her to know."

"Then why should I know either?" said Andy. "If he

has—done anything unworthy, Mr. Carruthers, I would much rather not know it."

"He has done nothing unworthy," exclaimed James, ignoring her question. "It is his country—his government, which has been unworthy of *him*, and has dragged him down into depths of shame and misery. Stop—don't speak yet," he went on, as Andy was about to reply. "I see you guess already what I have to tell you. Yes. He is a German, belonging by birth to the most hated class, forced by fate to share in their uttermost degradation. He came to me after having been cast ashore from a U-boat. Yet, Miss Kinross, I believe—I know him to be akin to all that is best and highest."

Andy was silent for a moment, very pale, her eyes very large and dark.

"A dreadful destiny," she said at last in a half whisper.

"You know the rest of his story I daresay," said Mr. Carruthers. "Mrs. Abercrombie brought him here. To her he is a waif thrown upon her kindness by the storm of the war, and so he is—let him remain so. To you he is an artist who may be invaluable to you, who by virtue of his art belongs to no country or time. Again let him remain so. To me—I tell you plainly, Miss Kinross, he has become, even in the few days he has been with me, almost a necessity."

"But to his country," said Andy, still very pale. "What is he to his country?"

"Ah, you see it as he does himself," said Mr. Carruthers. "He was educated in England according to a despicable plan devised by a despicable uncle, but at his mother's knee he had learned to be loyal to Germany—to the Germany of high and brave tradition, the Germany of Goethe, which still revered in part at least—'the true, the beautiful, the good'—the Germany that is now, alas! only a memory.

"To this he is loyal to the core. He wanted to go straight back and fight for it. He came to me—he had been

a pupil of mine in pre-war days—to ask me for help to do it. He would go down of course with the rest of those rogues and scoundrels—his countrymen—in the general crash, as some frail plant, that has grown up among them, might go down with an avalanche of stocks and stones, but I persuaded him that, for his country's sake, he must regain his mental balance before returning to the arena, and I think I may save him yet."

"Save him?" said Andy.

"Yes, the Investigation already interests him," said Mr. Carruthers, "and, by keeping him in close touch with the mysteries of the ages, I hope to make him forget the unimportant fact, that, in his present existence, he happens to be a German."

"I see," said Andy slowly.

"Therefore Mrs. Abercrombie must not know," said Mr. Carruthers. "She is a rabid anti-German. She is president of a branch of the Empire League. *Now* do you understand?"

He rose as he spoke, and Andy rose too, but still with the slight frown between her eyebrows.

"I understand *that*," she said. "What I do not understand is why you should have told *me*, Mr. Carruthers."

"Ah, that I am unable to tell you," he replied, and with this he so hastily took his leave, that, before Andy had time to press her question, he was already half-way downstairs again.

. . . . . .

Still frowning, she sat down once more at the table and drew her manuscript towards her. She gazed then for a long time at her fugue-subject without seeing it. She had indeed another subject in her mind which, for the moment, wholly occupied it, and instead of writing down her fugue-answer she was pondering the answer to her own question.

Why had Mr. Carruthers told her the truth about Ascher? Whatever was the use of it? Why should this wretched

disclosure have been made to her merely to make her uncomfortable?

For it had simply made her uncomfortable—no, more than that—it had made her feel sick and sorry, as she had often felt in a theatre, when some victim of ill-fortune was agonising on the stage against odds that were quite hopeless. She could never feel the same again, of course, to Ascher. She could never *be* the same again, she feared, either. Oh, it was a horrid pity! Mr. Carruthers, the bungling old fool, had simply spoiled everything for ever.

She thought over in detail the two meetings she had had with Ascher, and found the strangeness of his manner, the night before, accounted for. He had come in, she remembered, during the reading of the paper, and their comments thereon. No wonder he had been strange. The thought of the newspaper brought other thoughts with it. To Mr. Carruthers she left the responsibility for harbouring an enemy alien, but was it loyal to Archie, she wondered, for her to go on being friends with Ascher? To Archie even now in full career after the enemy. Yet Archie, she knew, would be the first to welcome him as an artist—as a help to her. . . . And Ascher's plight, caught thus in the clutch of circumstance, would have made Archie sorry for him too —Archie the generous-hearted. . . .

Oh, that old fool Carruthers! If he had only kept quiet. If he had only let things be. Then again the question recurred. Whatever had made him speak to her?

She longed to discuss the whole thing with Mrs. Abercrombie. She knew Mr. Carruthers so well. She would perhaps have been able to guess his motive. She had understood so thoroughly and immediately about her and Archie. She would have been able now to understand thoroughly and immediately about her and—

Here the thought-fugue suddenly stopped short, harshly, dissonantly, on a chord of dismay. But presently it went on again, modulating swiftly through wrath and anger to sheer amusement.

"He thinks I might fall in love with him," she said to herself, and laughed aloud. "He can't know about Archie —or me either. Poor old man! So he couldn't rest until he had told me and prevented any untoward international complications. Oh, I do wish I could tell Aunt Em! How she will laugh some day when I tell her!"

She laughed again herself, dismissing the subject, and then she once more summoned the fugue demon, squaring her elbows on the music-paper, and selecting the sharpest of the pencils. No Demon appeared, however, though everything for his reception was just as it had been before, the table prepared, the woods whispering outside the windows, the portrait of Beethoven glooming down from above the mantelpiece.

The Demon came not, but the face of Ascher, pale and ravaged as on the night before, seemed to be ever between her and the music-paper.

All the same she persisted, in defiant mood, and, with a short break for luncheon, she worked steadily until four o'clock, by which time she had produced a fugue, neatly written, mathematically correct, and totally uninteresting.

Young Ellen bringing in tea coincided with the last chord.

"Is Mrs. Abercrombie in?" said Andy, looking up.

"No, Miss," said Ellen, "she's never come back yet. But she said not to expect her till we saw her. She was going to Mrs. Forgan's."

Ellen made up the fire, and Andy had tea. When she had finished she rose, went over to the fireplace, and tearing up her fugue into strips, laid them neatly on a blazing log.

She was watching the ashes of the music-paper writhe like flimsy snakes among the flames, when she heard the footsteps on the stairs for which she had been listening, it now seemed to her, all day—and presently Ascher entered.

As he came forward to where she sat still by the fire-

place, she looked up at him with a kind of amazement. She had been expecting to see the face that had haunted her since morning to the exclusion of the fugue demon. But here was no martyr—no tortured victim. No soul in hell looked out of the calm eyes, but one serene, uplifted above earthly things and neither to be pitied nor patronised.

"Have you something to show me?" he said, after they had exchanged greetings. "If you have, will you let me see it quickly, because to-night I have come to play to you."

Andy sprang up and stood beside him in front of the fire.

"Ah, how good of you!" she exclaimed. "No, I have nothing to show you, though I have been working all day, except those ashes there."

She pointed to the writhing snakes, and for a moment they smiled into each other's eyes.

"Come then," he said, and turning away to the piano he opened it and sat down, while she went off to a far corner. It was a seat where she could lean her arms on the low window-sill, and watch the last of the sunset behind the trees.

"If Archie could have been here too, it would have been quite perfect," she said to herself, as Ascher began playing.

Her thoughts for a time were all of Archie, of what he was doing at that moment, of when he would come home, of their future life together, of the fame he had asked her, for his sake, to conquer. And the more she thought of him the more confident she became that, when he knew all, he would think her friendship with Ascher no disloyalty. "To you he is an artist," Mr. Carruthers had said, "who may be invaluable to you, and who by virtue of his art belongs to no country or time. Let him remain so."

"Vogue alors la galère," she now responded, abandoning herself to the hour and the music.

. . . . . .

Thinking it over in cold blood afterwards, Ascher knew that he had excelled himself that night. The very souls of the gods had seemed to reinforce his, to inspire, to direct his.

The hour had extended itself to two hours. The band of sunset-glow behind the tree-tops had narrowed to a mere pale strip, and Andy, whether in the body or out of the body she could not tell, was listening, enthralled, to one nocturne after another. She was afloat afar on a fairy sea in a glamour of moonlight and slow-swinging water, where strange echoes sounded from time to time of mortal griefs and loves and longings. . . .

When, all at once, there came an interruption.

It was what Mr. Carruthers would have called a tangible one.

It was nothing less than the sudden entrance of Young Ellen carrying a lighted lamp in one hand, a note in the other, and a small Japanese tray, which she held in her teeth until she had deposited the lamp on the table, after which, taking the tray in her lamp hand, she placed the note upon it and presented it.

"From Mrs. Abercrombie, Miss," she said. "Geordie Forgan from Cock-ma-lone has brought it, and is waitin' to see if there is a answer."

Andy tore open the note.

"Dear Andy," it ran, "get me, like a dear, the things undermentioned." Here followed a list of medicines, eatables and garments. "And bring or send them to me at once. Mrs. Forgan here is very ill, and as all the people about are down with influenza, except blithering idiots, I am staying all night.—Yours in haste, E. A.

"*P.S.*—Bring the formamint lozenges, and before you come in here, put one in your mouth."

"Tell Geordie to wait," said Andy.

And handing the note to Ascher, who had risen and was closing the piano—

"Please read it," she said, and then hastened away to obey her order.

In Mrs. Abercrombie's room she collected the medicines and a hot-water bag. Then she ran downstairs.

Geordie, very breathless, was standing in the dusk of the porch. He had refused to come in because, he said, he did not want to waste time sitting down. His real reason was, however, that though he was twelve, and the head of the family for the moment, he had been weeping sore all the way there.

Young Ellen was ready with a basket. The bottles were packed into it wrapped in a wad of cotton-wool.

"Now," said Andy, handing it over, "run, Geordie, for all you are worth, and say I am bringing the other things."

She bounded up to her own room then, and presently returned with hat and coat on, and in a few minutes was ready to set out, carrying another basket and a bundle of goodly size.

"It's terrible to see ye awa' oot like this into the pitmirk, Miss," said Ellen, perturbed. "If my auntie had been in I would ha' gane wi' ye mysel', but Mr. Carruthers's supper is to get."

"Oh, I'm all right," said Andy cheerfully. "It's not pitmirk at all. It will be quite light when the moon gets through the clouds."

"A' the same it's no' nice," said Ellen, by no means convinced. "An' a' these parcels," she added, with the effect of wringing her hands.

"Parcels!" cried Andy. "Those are thistle-down to what I have carried hundreds of times."

She was off into the middle of the road before Ellen had time for another word.

She was not destined to go alone after all, however. Hardly had she started than Ascher came up with her.

"Will you let me come too?" he said. "The Forgans are friends of mine."

And, in spite of her protests, taking the bundles from her, he told her of his journey with the Forgans.

"Poor Mrs. Forgan," he added, "she was so happy that day."

They walked on together through a strange black and white world. The moon, though as yet it was out of their sight, had emerged again somewhere behind the trees. Their footsteps were almost noiseless in the mud. And the spell of the silent woods seemed to be upon them as they went.

Andy was the first to speak.

"Geordie ought to be far on his way by now," she said. "I only hope he won't have smashed anything in his hurry and excitement."

"Mrs. Abercrombie will be a godsend to them," said Ascher. "I know how splendid she is in trouble."

"And I too," said Andy.

Then again there was a pause, but Andy's thoughts had wandered from her destination to her companion. She was remembering what Mrs. Abercrombie had told her of the first coming of Ascher to her house. A horror of what he must have seen and suffered had begun to turn her slowly cold, and made her snatch at the first subject she could think of with which to break the heavy silence.

"You must play me the nocturnes again," she said. "I think some of them are the most beautiful things I know. Chopin must have been specially inspired when he wrote them."

"He was," said Ascher. "You remember Georges Sand was with him."

"Ah—that was a strange story," said Andy after a moment.

"Yes, I suppose it was," said Ascher. "Though it is sad, is it not, that such spirit-friendships should be thought strange?"

"Yes," Andy agreed, "it is sad. But spirits—embodied spirits—*are* apt to be thought strange, when they act as though they were disembodied."

"That is true," he said gravely.

But then, for the first time, quite suddenly and unex-

pectedly, they laughed together, and the flash of humour brought them more understanding of each other than anything had yet done. All in a moment, however, reaction followed.

"How hateful of us to laugh," said Andy. "With that poor woman so ill—dying perhaps."

"Ah, but," said Ascher, "one has to laugh sometimes even in the midst——"

"Of sadness, yes, I know," said Andy.

They laughed no more, however, and hardly spoke again, and only one incident occurred to break the monotony of the next two miles. Suddenly, as they were approaching a part of the road upon which the moonlight lay very bright, a man came quite suddenly into it, out of the wood. He had begun to cross the road, when he stood hesitating for a moment half-way, as though uncertain whether to advance or to go back. Then, making up his mind, he crossed quickly to the other side, clambered over the low wall there, and disappeared again into the wood.

"Strange," said Ascher. "I could have sworn that that was Bob Lindsay."

"And was it not?" said Andy.

"It couldn't have been," said Ascher. "Mrs. Binnie told me to-day that he had left last night—for France."

"Then of course it couldn't have been he—could it?" said Andy absently, for she was thinking of other things much more interesting to her than Bob Lindsay.

She had again become possessed with uneasy wonder, almost horror, at the strange situation in which she found herself, walking with Ascher calmly along this quiet road, while her lover was fighting to the death with his fellow-countrymen.

By all the ordinary rules of reasoning, surely, she was being guilty of disloyalty, yet something outside and beyond reason was convincing her that she was being nothing of the sort. The testimony of Mr. Carruthers made her certain that Ascher, whatever else he might be, was one

who could be relied upon to take no mean advantage. He who was so loyal in spite of everything to his own country would not be disloyal to the friend, who for the moment was sheltering him. But what perplexed her was that, even without the guarantee of Mr. Carruthers, in whom Mrs. Abercrombie had evidently implicit faith, she now found herself trusting the man walking quietly beside her, as she would have trusted one she had known all her life. Yet she had met and talked with him only three times.

Thinking over this, she found her attitude of mind towards him more and more difficult to understand.

"It must be the music," she concluded, with something like misgiving. "Has it bewitched me? Am I deceiving myself? Is Mr. Carruthers deceiving himself?"

Was the Investigator's interest in his work making him endow this man, who was being so useful to him, with imaginary qualities? Was Ascher really here for some hidden end?

The thought scared her badly for a moment. But on the heels of it came the remembrance of Ascher's face, as she had seen it on the night before. No—it was impossible. No sneak could look like that. It had been the face of a man in the depths of sorrow—despair perhaps, but not of one who was underhand.

She glanced at him again now, walking on, looking straight before him. They were in the full moonlight again just then. She could see his profile against the dark background of the trees, pale and clear-cut as a cameo. Again she was struck by his likeness to the portrait of the young war-poet resting gloriously in his grave amid the southern seas. . . . And, for the first time, the full tragedy of Ascher's fate was revealed to her.

"How he must envy even our rich dead," she said to herself. "He has nothing even to die for."

And with this thought came another and final one. No more misery, if she could help it, would be heaped upon him by her. The letter she had half made up her mind

to write to Archie, in which she would tell him everything and ask what he would have her do, and which would probably worry him to death, would never be written. Afterwards would be time enough to tell him. Afterwards, when all was over . . . when she could explain everything, with his arms round her, with his eyes looking into hers. . . .

At a point further on, where a road diverged, a panting little figure met them.

"Geordie!" exclaimed Andy.

"Ay, it's me," he said. "The leddy sent me back to see that ye didna miss the turnin'. And," he added with an extra sigh, "I am to cairry yer bundles for ye."

"No, no," said Ascher. "You show us the road. That will be enough for you. I am carrying the bundles."

Nothing loth, for, though he would have died rather than admit it, Geordie was played out, he went on ahead down a rough cart-track, between pale stubble-fields.

"How is your mother?" inquired Andy, as they trudged along after him.

"Very bad," said Geordie brokenly. "Mistress Macallister said she couldna live till mornin', but the leddy says she'll be blowed if she doesna."

"Good for Aunt Em!" said Andy.

The house, a solitary two-storied abode, which had once been a farm-house, was not far distant, and presently, turning another corner, they found themselves at the door of it. Not far off two women were conversing in low tones, but very volubly.

"It's a fell-like thing," Andy heard one say, who, she was sure, must be Mistress Macallister, "that strangers can pit neebours to the door this way. As sure as death I never saw anything like it."

Some indication of the presence of more strangers, however, having apparently been given her, she stopped abruptly, and, standing with arms akimbo, joined her friend in a silent stare of disapproval.

CHAPTER XI

IN WHICH SOME ACCOUNT IS GIVEN OF ANOTHER NOCTURNE, AND MRS. BINNIE FINDS IT NECESSARY TO INTERVIEW THE CHIEF SPECIAL CONSTABLE

For what seemed a long minute Andy and Ascher had to stand on the doorstep, exposed to the animosity of Mistress Macallister and her companion. The door was locked, and, when Geordie knocked, no one at first took any notice. Presently, however, a piping voice was heard within apparently admonishing Mrs. Abercrombie.

"Yes, yes, Mary," they heard her answer in the distance.

Then just within the door—"Who's there?" she demanded.

"It's me, Aunt Em," said Andy.

"And Ascher," he added.

Immediately the door flew open.

"Bricks both!" said Mrs. Abercrombie enthusiastically, yet in subdued tones. "I never was more glad to see anybody. I had to turn out Mrs. Macallister, who was quite impossible, and that other fool went with her."

They were standing between the doors in the little entrance-passage.

"Go in, Geordie," she said to the boy, who was listening open-mouthed. "Go in and help Mary."

When he obeyed she continued in a low voice—

"The mother is very ill and the doctor can't get back to-night, but he told me all that can be done, and it will take me all my time to do it. I must leave the rest to you two. You, Andy, must remain and help with the children. Some of them I am sure are in for it. And you," she

added, turning to Ascher, "I want to go straight back and tell Mrs. Binnie she's wanted."

"All right, Mrs. Abercrombie," said Ascher at once.

"I'd rather have you here of course," Mrs. Abercrombie continued, as Andy went into the house to take up her appointed duties. "You are so splendid with children, and I question whether Andy is, poor dear."

"I'll come back," said Ascher eagerly. "I'll be as quick as I can and come back."

"Good man!" said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Off you go then, and tell Mrs. Binnie that Mrs. Forgan woke up crying for her after Geordie left, saying she had something she must tell her. It may be only delirium of course, but it raises her temperature, and I don't want her to do it often, for when she begins it I can't quiet her."

"I'll tell Mrs. Binnie," said Ascher, setting off again.

The aggrieved Mistress Macallister and her friend had taken their departure, and, where they had stood glaring, there was now only a patch of moonlight. They had withdrawn to their own cottages presumably, or perhaps to the rescue of other invalids more appreciative of their assistance, or less under the power of strangers. . . . Ascher therefore went on his way uncriticised and soon reached the high-road, already for him a place of memories, and strangely full of points of interest.

Here Andy, skirting a muddy pool, had swerved inadvertently against his arm for a moment. Here she had spoken. Here she had been silent. Here they had laughed together. Here they had quarrelled over the carrying of the bundles. Here they had met first. So measuring the miles by moments, he came at last back to the Dovecote.

The outer door was ajar, and, hardly waiting for the answer to his knock in his hurry, he entered the kitchen and found Young Ellen alone there.

"No, she's no' back yet, sir," she said in answer to his question. "But she canna be long noo. It's the day she

works at Broadlees an' auld Lindsay whiles keeps her long past her time he's paid for, clashin' an' claverin' to her."

"By the way," began Ascher, and it was on the tip of his tongue to tell Young Ellen of the man, so like Bob Lindsay, that he had seen on the road an hour before. But Ellen, who had begun toasting a slice of bread, interrupted him.

"I'm glad ye've come, sir," she said, "because o' Mr. Carruthers's supper. It should ha' been up lang syne, but ye see I was waitin' on my auntie. For, since the mornin' I found you in Mr. Carruthers's bed, I never gang into the ither end by mysel' if I can help it."

Ascher laughed.

"Get it ready then," he said. "Let me toast the bread while you get on with the other things, for I am in a hurry. I am going back to Mrs. Forgan's to help at least until your aunt comes."

"Bless me!" cried Young Ellen, handing over the toasting-fork. "Are they wantin' my auntie there next?"

"Mrs. Forgan wants her," said Ascher.

"Mimy?" exclaimed Ellen, "an' what for does she want her?"

"She is half-delirious," said Ascher, "and it may be nothing of importance, but she says she has something that she must tell Mrs. Binnie."

Young Ellen stared for a moment. Then illumination came to her.

"I ken what it'll be," she said. "Mimy was always jealouser-minded than she should ha' been, puir thing, an' noo she's thinkin' she is to dee an' wants me—I mean my auntie—to ken she's sorry for't."

Ascher turned the toast on his fork.

"That will be it," he said. "Now do be quick, won't you? I promised I would be as quick as I could."

As he spoke Ellen turned sharply towards the door.

"There she is noo," she said. Then after a moment—"Did ye no' hear footsteps, sir?"

"I did hear something," said Ascher.

They both listened intently, going on the while with their occupations, and both heard sounds as though some one were moving about very softly, just outside.

"Is that you, Auntie?" called Ellen after a moment.

But there was no answer.

"It canna have been her," said Ellen. "It must ha' been the wind."

Yet there was no wind, as Ascher happened to notice.

"Why don't you keep a dog?" he said. "But I suppose you think that having the special constable almost opposite to you is sufficient."

Ellen glanced coyly at him, then seeing he knew nothing of the Affair—

"Ay, that must be it, sir," she said, smiling to herself.

"Is the supper nearly ready?" said Ascher then, seeing with impatience that she was lapsing into meditativeness.

"I'll no' be five minutes, sir," she answered, jumping up, and hastening into the scullery for her frying-pan in her most business-like manner.

Even as she bustled, however, she kept on talking, interjecting remarks between the making of coffee and the frying of cod-steaks.

"Ye see," she said, reverting to the subject of Mimy, "things like that worries ye awful when ye're lyin' at the pint o' death."

"Are you sure?" said Ascher, looking to see if his slice was toasted enough.

"Certain," said Young Ellen, deftly turning over her steaks. "It's weel kent that the whole o' yer past life appears before ye in the last moments."

"Does it?" said Ascher, smiling grimly—and then there was silence between them, till Ellen had completed her dainty supper tray and handed it over to her assistant.

He, in his turn, lost no time in handing it over to Mr.

Carruthers, whom he found reading hard, in the absence, he said, of the Higher Intelligence.

"I may as well make use of this enforced pause in the Investigation to increase my present knowledge of the subject," he said. "Who knows where some point of contact may not occur which may help to bridge the gulf between it and the past?"

"Then the Investigation proper——" began Ascher.

"Is at a complete stand-still for the time," said Mr. Carruthers quietly.

"But how do you account for this, sir?" said Ascher much concerned. "It was going on so splendidly. Why is it at a stand-still?"

"Ah—that I cannot tell you," replied Mr. Carruthers, just as he had replied to Andy in the morning.

He was quite pleased, however, that Ascher should again leave him.

"You can do nothing for me to-night," he said. "And you may be able to do much for Mrs. Abercrombie."

Then, as Ascher still looked concerned—

"Don't worry about the Investigation," he added reassuringly. "It will go on again all right soon—quite soon, my dear Ascher—I am convinced of that."

. . . . . .

Little Mary Forgan, aged ten and a half, was crying silently but very bitterly when Andy found her.

She was crying, she said, because Dash was so heavy and would not sleep anywhere but on her knees. The lady had told her to keep him quiet, because, if he went on making the noise he was making, his mother would get worse and perhaps never get better.

"Yes, I did say that," said Mrs. Abercrombie, who had followed Andy, "to my shame I said it—for I was at my wits' end at the moment. But now, Mary, you can go to bed, and this lady will take Dash."

Dash accordingly was transferred—still asleep—from Mary's small hard knee to Andy's.

"Where he should be much more comfortable," Mrs. Abercrombie remarked, when Mary had gone away to bed, and she came back to give her final orders.

"We may thank our stars," she said to Andy as she poked up the fire with as little noise as possible, "that the baby at least is off our hands, for what we should have done with him I know not. Fortunately the one sensible woman I know of in this neighbourhood just now, who is not down with influenza, is a nursing mother with only one infant. She says she has enough for triplets and welcomed him with open arms, so that, if he is not a little food-hog, he should be satisfied; but his absence makes complications here—and in short, you needn't depend upon me to do a single thing for you, Andy. To save Mrs. Forgan alive will be as much as I can manage—if I can manage that, which I very much doubt."

With these words, to Andy's dismay, her commander-in-chief left her, and, crossing the room, opened a door there and disappeared, leaving her in the half-dark in more senses than one, to cope with, she knew not how many, little Forgans.

And this too with a very fat weighty one on her knees, who seemed to be very hot with a heavy cold, and whom she dared not disturb. Yet the first thing absolutely necessary seemed to be to remove this hindrance to activity.

A box-bed in the corner opposite to her offered relief. There she resolved she would dispose Dash, and so be free to attend to the other members of the family. She rose, therefore, very slowly and steadily, bracing her arms to sustain Dash's weight, and took one step forward, then another and another. In six steps she had reached the bed. A moment more and she would have had Dash laid down upon it, when, to her horror, she perceived that his eyes were open, and that he was regarding her with strong disfavour. He had been too surprised up till then to make a sound, but his mouth was open and even as she looked he gave vent to a preliminary whimper.

"No, no, dear," she said hastily. But it was all no use. In another moment there was a heart-rending, ear-splitting roar of wrath, at the sound of which, it seemed to her, the room became alive with children.

One, whom till now she had not seen, started up at the back of the bed. Geordie appeared at a side-door, and another child—not Mary—on the ladder-like stairs that led apparently to a room above. Another unseen began to cry in the distance.

"I've done it thoroughly anyhow," said Andy grimly, as she hastily resumed the seat she had left, expecting every moment to be pounced upon by Mrs. Abercrombie.

To her surprise, however, Mrs. Abercrombie did not appear, and, to her astonishment, Dash instantly stopped roaring.

"Ay, that's what he wants ye see," said a small voice from the box-bed, accompanied by a sound as of its owner snuggling down again. "He aye kens what he wants."

"And has to get it too, I suppose," said Andy ruefully.

Clearly the only thing to be done was to concentrate upon Dash, and leave all the other Forgans to Geordie, who, tired as he was, seemed unable to rest, and was wandering about like an unquiet spirit. From time to time he would listen at his mother's door, then he would mend the fire and set the flames leaping. At these times a flare of light would illuminate the room, showing up its many little gleams of gaudiness. Andy had never seen Mimy, but she took note appreciatively of what, in another place, she would have called her scheme of colour. Her eyes, roving round, dwelt with pleasure on the many-hued crockery on the dresser-shelves, on the gaily-striped cotton curtains of the window and the bed, on the black-haired red-cheeked china ornaments above the fireplace, on the painted clock, the gorgeous almanacs. . . . Finally they rested on the rakish bright green feather in the jaunty hat which hung on a hook on the bedroom door.

This last item fascinated her, hanging as though it had

been flung there, while its owner, whose faint voice she could hear uplifted from time to time, was lying just through the door from it at grips perhaps with death. It seemed typical of all that she had cast aside when she lay down—all the dauntless courage—all the joy in life. . . . A large photograph of the absent Dash—in colour, of course—seemed to dominate the room from its place over the fire, and his strong handsome face, when the light fell upon it, seemed to lend poignancy to everything.

Had they seen the last of each other, these two—who had lived so long and happily together? Mrs. Abercrombie's words in the wood occurred to her. This place also was aware, as the shrine in the wood had been. Not, however, of the memories of centuries, of unseen dawns, and unheard tempests. Here were only the memories of a few short years. But what memories they were!

Here love had been, and pain and passion, grief and joy. Here souls had been born into the world. Here had been partings. Had they perhaps—Dash and Mimy—sat by the fire together on their last night? What had it not seen—that fireplace? The very cracks in the bricks of it seemed to be remembering. . . . Geordie was remembering too, sitting on the fender, a disconsolate little bowed figure, with glittering tears rolling down his cheeks, when he thought no one could see them.

Andy wondered afterwards what they would have done without Geordie. She herself slept at times. She could not help it. But Geordie never seemed to close an eye. Every time she woke he was doing something. Now he was boiling the kettle for Mrs. Abercrombie, now taking a drink of water to one of the company upstairs, now asking her if she was needing anything, now helping her to change Dash from one arm to the other.

After he had done this last for the third time, Andy tried desperately not to sleep again. Geordie's pale face as he sat watching the kettle seemed an intolerable reproach.

"I will not sleep," she said to herself. "I will not desert him in his agony."

By a supreme effort she did keep awake for half an hour, assisted thereto by the unconscious Dash, who was showing some signs of waking, but Ascher, returning later, found her again asleep. Seeing her thus with the child in her arms in the flickering firelight was a new revelation to him. She seemed like a tired Madonna and he worshipped accordingly, not being aware that five minutes before she had fallen asleep, being cross, she had all but shaken her slumbering infant for being so heavy and self-willed and snuffly.

There was not much time for devotions, however, for almost immediately the child that was in the box-bed woke up. It was the Fourth, called Phemie, and she began to cry suddenly, saying she was frightened, and calling to her mother to come.

By the time Geordie had induced her to go with him upstairs to Mary's bed, Andy was awake.

"What's the matter now?" she said, when she saw Ascher.

As she spoke, the door of Mrs. Forgan's room opened, and Mrs. Abercrombie appeared upon the threshold. She was a strange-looking figure, in a shortish petticoat, with a large shawl tied round her shoulders and a small one round her head. She was paler than usual, and looked old and haggard.

"I've had an awful time," she said in a low voice. "But she's asleep now and cooler—decidedly cooler. For God's sake get tea, somebody."

Then once more she disappeared.

"You get the tea," said Ascher, and before Andy knew it Dash was lifted and laid across his shoulder. More than this, to her surprise, before she had had time to collect cups and saucers and make the tea he was deposited on the bed.

"How did you do it?" she said amazed.

"Oh, I've always been able to manage children," he said. "It seems to come natural to me."

Again they smiled for a moment into each other's eyes, standing in the firelight together, as in Mrs. Abercrombie's sitting-room. Andy, remembering that other moment, however, perceived that this was very different. Before, he had smiled over the destruction of her fugue, over his understanding of her mood at the moment, over the futility of her day's work. Now, here on the hearthstone of Dash and Mimy, it seemed to her that they were smiling over the destruction of his hopes of human happiness.

Next moment, however, a revulsion of feeling came.

"Why should he not be happy yet?" she said to herself. "There is some German girl probably whom he loves, and who loves him well enough to weather the storm with him."

The smile died in her eyes at the thought, and she turned away from him to finish her tea-making. And at this the light died in his eyes too.

"Nevertheless," he said cheerfully, "the last time I tackled this chap he *did* roar!"

"I am glad of that," said Andy. "It prevents me feeling too humiliated."

"Is that tea ready yet?" said Mrs. Abercrombie, opening the door again. "No—I can't come out. Just a cup in my hand. Thank you."

Bearing her cup with her she returned to her post, and after that nothing more happened for a long time.

It seemed to Andy that a sense of betterness, of more ease and less tension seemed to have come into the house with Ascher. Dash slept like a log, tucked up over the ears, and presently Geordie was induced to lie down beside him. She herself took Geordie's place, attending upon the opening of the door and the demands of Mrs. Abercrombie, while Ascher went the round upstairs administering drinks and feeling pulses and temperatures.

"Two of them have got it I think," he reported; "neither

of them badly so far as I can judge. But they're jolly hot and uncomfortable, poor little beggars. I'd better stay upstairs and watch them."

He stayed up accordingly, and all was peace. Even the faint complaining voice from the sick-room had not sounded for some time and Andy once more was making desperate efforts to keep awake, when, just before dawn, she was suddenly and violently roused by a long thin scream as of wild terror from upstairs.

She started to her feet, but at the same moment Geordie started up in bed.

"It's Phemie again," he said. "She's frightened again—I'd better——" And he began getting up.

"No, no," said Andy, helping him back. "Mr. Ascher is there. He will manage her."

He seemed to be managing her indeed, for no more cries were heard, only a faint sobbing, with Ascher's voice ever and anon between.

"Ay—he's managed," said Geordie, with a sigh of relief, as he lay comfortably down again. "I never thocht he would though, for when she's like that she's awful whiles. I've seen her cairry on for hours."

Andy shuddered.

"Oh, surely not," she said, "poor little thing. Why does she do it? What frightens her?"

"It's my feyther's fault," said Geordie. "He forgot ae nicht he was here that she was in the bed there when he was sittin' speakin' to mither at the fire, an' he was tellin' aboot the Belgian bairns that he had seen wi' their haunds cut aff by the German soldiers—an' the wee——"

"Yes—yes—I know," said Andy hastily. "I have heard. But don't think any more about it now, and go to sleep, or you'll never be ready to help us to-morrow morning."

She tucked him in, and, almost before she had finished doing so, he was again sound asleep.

She was bending over him to adjust the quilt over Dash, who had slumbered through the whole disturbance, when

she was again startled by a sound of footsteps behind her, and, turning sharply, she found Ascher.

She had only time to recognise him in the dimness before he spoke urgently—breathlessly—

"Did you hear that child upstairs?" he whispered. "She awoke in terror. I could hardly quiet her—some one—a German soldier—was cutting off her hands with a sword she said—doing—oh, horrible things. . . . I should not have left her—but I had to come and ask . . . Miss Kinross—is it possible that she has heard this—that there have been such things?"

His face was terrible, and Andy had a bad moment. But the growing hatred and indignation of many months rose up and spoke bitterly—passionately—in spite of her.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, Mr. Ascher. It has been as she says . . . and more shame to them . . . the low brutes . . . the beastly cowards . . . the hateful fiends . . . more shame to them."

"Thank you," he said hoarsely. "I only wanted to know. I—I—had hoped," he added, turning away, "that she had been only dreaming."

"Well so she was most likely," retorted Andy still at white heat. "For you see, Mr. Ascher, they have poisoned even the children's dreams."

He went away then without another word, and, till the grey morning, Andy saw no more of him.

Then, however, after Mrs. Binnie arrived, he came down again, passed in silence through the kitchen, and went out.

. . . . . .

Mr. Carruthers found him by his bed when he awoke.

"Hullo, Ascher!" he said cheerfully. Then receiving no reply—"What has happened?" he said alarmed; for Ascher's face was set and dreadful.

"What has happened, sir, is that I am banned for ever from the love of little children," he said. "I am of the

nation of brutes and cowards and fiends who have poisoned the children's dreams."

He told him then about the Fourth, called Phemie, of her terrible awaking, her frightful story.

"I shall never get over it, sir," said Ascher, "and the way in which that little thing clung to me begging me not to let the Germans come to her. . . . Even if I had known of it before. . . . But I had not known. . . ."

"And, if you had," said Mr. Carruthers, "what earthly difference could it have made, Ascher? to these poor little children I mean. The mischief was done long before you knew of it. You must harden your heart, my dear Ascher. You must imitate the philosophy of hundreds and thousands of eminently respectable people, who do not consider themselves debarred from the love of children in the least by what they permit to be done, year in year out, to thousands of poor little brats in the slums of our great cities.

"Of course, I grant you this Belgian business is an abominable thing—a blatant thing—a fearful thing. But if you are to be an Investigator, Ascher, you must keep control over those nerves of yours—or rather rise out of them—be superior to them. Work like ours, if it is to be carried on at all, must often be so at the expense of sympathy."

"I know—I know, sir," said Ascher bitterly, turning away. "I am afraid I am a poor help to you—I would be better back in my own place. There at least I would not be a skulking fraud and an outsider."

"Ascher," said Mr. Carruthers, "don't make this harder for me than it is. Your presence here, I tell you, is—or will be when you have pulled yourself together—invaluable to me. Without you I shall never carry the Investigation through as I might if you were with me, and I am desperately anxious to keep you. Wait—even if it is only a few days. Think things over quietly. Commune as the Psalmist says, and he was a wise man, with your own soul.

And then if you still wish it, I shall let you go. The money for your journey is lying there ready for you."

. . . . . .

By this time Mrs. Abercrombie and Andy were having breakfast together, at the kitchen fire in Cock-ma-lone, Mrs. Abercrombie, still in shawls, presiding.

"Yes, and help me largely, my dear," she said. "Anxiety always leaves me ravenous."

"It has left you then?" said Andy. "Mrs. Forgan is really better?"

"My dear—so much so," said Mrs. Abercrombie, "that I begin to think, with Mrs. Binnie, that that doctor is an alarmist. She is annoyed, I can see, though she is too polite to say so, at being brought here. No wonder either, for Mrs. Forgan, now that the fear of death is removed from her, cannot be induced to tell her what she was asked to come to hear about."

"The whole thing was an illusion perhaps," said Andy.

"No, I don't think so," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "She says she had meant to tell when she thought she was going to die, but now that she is going to live she cannot."

"But how very irritating for Mrs. Binnie," said Andy, "to have walked three miles for nothing after her own day's work."

"She shall drive home with the doctor," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "He said he would try to be here by eight o'clock, when he expected to find his patient dead. He had, he said, hundreds of patients to see at Wood End—which was surely an exaggeration—and would give me a lift."

. . . . . .

Mrs. Abercrombie, when she had reported to Andy at the breakfast-table that Mrs. Binnie was annoyed, was very much within the truth. Although hardly a ripple appeared upon the surface of her Napoleonic calm, Mrs. Binnie was furious. Here was she, having lost a whole night's sleep and walked three long miles for nothing. And Mimy getting better too! If she had been dying it would have

been less riling. But while she—Mrs. Binnie—had been sitting beside her, she had actually said she was hungry and asked for breakfast. Was there ever such a thing heard of? And yet nothing Mrs. Binnie could do would make her say why she had sent for her, though she gave her another chance even when the doctor's motor was waiting and the doctor had gone into the other room with Mrs. Abercrombie, leaving her to follow.

"Will ye no' speak noo, Mimy, and ease yer mind?" she had said, hoping to the last to get an answer, for her curiosity was now so thoroughly aroused that it was acting as a sedative to her anger.

"No, it's no' possible," said Mimy stubbornly, though she lay pale and limp and powerless-looking.

"A' thing's possible if ye pit yer mind tae 't," said Old Ellen persuasively.

But Mimy was not Young Ellen.

"No' this," was the answer.

She had to go off then for the doctor was in a hurry. But her thoughts, as she sat majestically and rather sullenly in the motor, remained with Mimy and kept turning her secret round and round like some casket that will not open.

They had to stop half-way that the doctor might see a patient, and, during the time she was left sitting, a new idea came to her, suggested by something she herself had experienced, something Young Ellen had told her the night before. This, by the time they had reached Wood End, had sprouted into a definite plan of action, a plan which had the advantage, as she put it to herself, of killing two birds with one stone. As soon, therefore, as the doctor's car had left her on her own doorstep, and moved on down the village street, she proceeded to put it into execution.

Mr. Dunwiddie, making his morning arrangements in preparation for the day's activities, presently beheld her, dressed in her best blacks and the bonnet she wore on Sundays, entering his shop door.

He hastened forward to the counter.

"But it's no' groceries I'm needin', Peter—it's advice," she said by way of preliminary. "To tell ye the plain truth it's the Chief Special Constable I'm needin'."

The Sunday bonnet gave emphasis to her words, and her hearer was duly impressed, though in reality the words "plain truth" were what she herself would have called jist a mainner o' speakin'. The plain truth really was that Old Ellen was anxious—now that Bob was really gone—to get on with the wedding, and pride preventing her discussing it over the counter, or taking the initiative in other ways, she had seized the opportunity presented to her of talking with her future nephew-in-law alone and face to face in the privacy of his back premises.

As Peter heard what she said he stopped leaning on the counter, smiling and rubbing his hands, and stood up like a poker.

"Ah—is that so?" he said. "Then be so good as to step in-bye, Mrs. Binnie."

And directing her with a wave of his hand to pass round the end of the counter, he flung open a door at the back of it and motioned to her to enter.

The sudden change from the obsequious shopkeeping manner to the stern official one was quite startling. Nevertheless, Mrs. Binnie decided, now she had begun the thing she must go through with it. Passing into the back-parlour, therefore, which smelt amongst other things of cheese and furniture polish, she took the chair indicated, and immediately set about delivering herself of her business.

"Ye'll think it not worth while botherin' about maybe," she said, "but somebody's wanderin' aboot efter dark scarin' folk, Peter."

"Scarin' folk?" said Mr. Dunwiddie, who had taken out a note-book and was writing in it.

"Ay," said Old Ellen. "I'm no' easy scared mysel' but whaever it is scared me, slinkin' alongside me in the wood,

whaur they couldna be seen, an' when I stoppit to listen—stoppin' theirsels an' breathin'?"

"Breathin'?" said Peter.

"Ay—breathin' *hard,*" said Old Ellen.

"Breathin' hard were they?" said Peter. "An' when was this ye heard them?"

"Last nicht—efter dark," said Ellen. "On my way hame frae Broadlees."

"It must ha' been fearsome," said Peter.

"Fearsome? I believe ye," said Ellen, warming to her subject. "But that's no' the worst o't, Peter. When I got hame to the Doo-cote there I found Ellen fair in the nerves, puir thing."

This again was a mainner o' speakin', for Young Ellen had only been a little excited. But Old Ellen was nothing if not thorough, and when she did tell a story, which was seldom, she took care to make it a good one.

"Ellen in the nerves?" exclaimed Peter, reddening to the roots of his hair, which as it only began far back gave him more scope for blushing than most people. At the same time his eyes seemed ready to start out of his head.

"Ellen in the nerves?" he repeated. "What for?"

"Ah—that's what I want ye to tell me," said Mrs. Binnie. "That's why I said I wantit the Chief Special Constable. It's no' very nice to hear folk ye canna see rinnin' alongside o' ye in the dark, but that I *can* stand, that I *can* put up wi', seein' it's jist mysel' that suffers, but folk rangin' roond the Doo-cote when I'm no' there an' drivin' Ellen oot o' her seeven senses I can *not* tolerate, Peter."

"Nor can I," exclaimed Peter. "Nor can I. But how do you account for it?" he said, after a moment.

"I cannot account for it," said Mrs. Binnie. "I can jist make a statement."

"Of course—of course," said Mr. Dunwiddie nastily, and wrote down the word "statement." "And have you anything more to state?" he added. "What did Ellen see?"

"Nothing," said Mrs. Binnie impressively. "She saw

nothing. But both she and Mr. Ascher, that was with her at the time, gettin' ready Mr. Carruthers's supper, heard footsteps quite distinct, and after Mr. Ascher left an' she was a' by hersel', she heard them again, an' when I got hame she was fair shakin'."

"Fair shakin' was she?" said Mr. Dunwiddie, becoming several degrees redder.

"Ay, Peter—shakin' like a leaf," said Mrs. Binnie. "But wait ye till I tell ye the rest. Later on, when this was a' past an' I had got her quietened, she gave me a message from Mimy Forgan askin' me to come to Cock-ma-lone immediately, for she had something to tell me. . . . Ah well—there I went—whole three mile—for I always was fond o' Mimy, an' I'd heard she was near her end wi' the Flu. But—ye'll no' believe it—when I got there she was better, an' no' deein' efter a', and she would tell me nothing."

"She would tell ye nothing?" exclaimed Peter. "What for did she send for ye then?"

"Ye may weel ask," said Mrs. Binnie. "But she had meant to tell me as lang as she thocht she was to dee. Noo that she was to live she said she was feared to tell me."

"Feared?" said Peter.

"Ay, an' what was she feared o'?" said Mrs. Binnie, and then paused rhetorically.

"God kens," said Peter unnecessarily.

"She was feared o' death," said Mrs. Binnie.

"Death?" exclaimed Peter, horrified.

"Nothing less I believe," said Mrs. Binnie. "So long's she thocht she was to dee onyway she wantit to tell—she was desperate to tell, an' it's my belief that she would tell it noo if somebody hadna pit the fear o' death on her."

"Weel if that's the case," said Peter, "he's a blackguard."

"Ay is he," assented Mrs. Binnie. "An' that's why I've come this mornin'."

"Yes—oh certainly," said Peter.

"An' put it into your hands," Mrs. Binnie continued.

"Oh certainly," said Peter again. "Quite right—certainly. Then your opinion is——" he went on.

"I was aye a lass," said Mrs. Binnie, regardless of her age, "for pittin' things thegither, Peter, an' I've pit this man thegither that breathes hard aboot the woods, an' ranges roond hooses at nicht, an' lays the fear o' death on folk."

"Mrs. Binnie," said Peter solemnly, "I wouldna wonder but yer richt. Onyway, the man's a blackguard."

Here he wrote down the word "blackguard."

"And," he went on, "the case will be attended to in due course."

"I'm pleased to hear ye say that," said Mrs. Binnie, "for noo I'll maybe get some sleep this nicht. Ellen, ye see, Peter, gave me nae peace until I laid it a' before ye."

At this point she rose.

Peter also rose.

"Mrs. Binnie," he said, "I'm prood to hear ye say so. There is no one—as you know and as Ellen knows, that I would do more for—that I would do so much for. Tell Ellen that this—this—Breather—will be exposed at any cost. Tell her——"

Here words failed him, and he had to pause to collect others.

"Tell her," he went on after a moment, "that I think I know who it is, that in fact I am sure—that I have received notice of him—that I am on my guard—and tell her too," he added, becoming absolutely scarlet, "that I am ready to guard her as well, night and day, whenever she gives the signal."

"Peter," said Mrs. Binnie, "ye'll ha' to excuse me, for I'll tell her nothing. But come you to the Doo-cote yersel'

an' say to her what ye've said to me, an' as sure's my name's Binnie she'll begin to fix the weddin'."

"No, no," said Peter, highly pleased nevertheless. "I'll ha' nae mair o' Ellen's fixin's. The way to dae wi' Ellen is first to fix things an' then tell her. To-day's Thursday, Mrs. Binnie. What d'ye say to next Thursday?"

CHAPTER XII

IN WHICH MR. DUNWIDDIE HAVING PLACED HIS AFFAIRS UPON A SATISFACTORY BASIS CONCENTRATES HIS ATTENTION UPON THE PUBLIC WEAL, AND THE FUGUE DEMON KEEPS AT BAY OTHER UNSEEN FORCES AT THE DOVECOTE

THE visit of Mrs. Binnie left her future nephew-in-law a prey to very mingled feelings. He was pleased with himself, and with what seemed to him the adroit manner in which he had elicited the invitation from Mrs. Binnie. At the same time, when the heat of the moment had passed, he became conscious that, in his capacity as Chief Special Constable, he had committed himself rather badly. He realised that in his desire to impress Mrs. Binnie and, through her, Young Ellen, he had come forth too boldly into the open, and had virtually challenged to single combat this man who was haunting the neighbourhood in such a strange and startling manner. On second thoughts he feared that he had been rather reckless, and, as he weighed out stores and did accounts and talked to customers, he became quite certain of it. Had it not been for the absence of his assistant, who was down with flu, he would have done no business, but would have retired to the seclusion of his back room, and given himself up to considering his situation. As it was, however, he was obliged to work, and more than one customer that morning might have benefited by his abstraction, had not all of them, fortunately for him, happened to be friends of long standing.

"Ye're no' yersel' the day, Dunwiddie," said one, as he handed back a shilling too much which had been given him

as change. "I'm thinkin' it's true what I've been hearin', an' that ye're in love. Ye're fair wandered."

"Bless ye, Dunwiddie—ye've forgot the weights, man," said another, as he poured rice into the brazen bowl of his weighing-machine with a reckless hand.

He longed for, yet dreaded, one o'clock when he would have to shut up his shop. It was the Thursday half-holiday, but there would be no holiday for him. He would have to tackle duties beside which shopkeeping was mere child's play. He would have to think, to devise, to plan, and then carry out, execute, accomplish something. If not to-day then to-morrow, if not to-morrow then the next day.

"But indeed the less time I give myself the better," he soliloquised after the manner of his betrothed, when, after he had found himself mixing the apples with the onions, he gave up trying to do anything but watch the hour approaching.

His housekeeper, Kate Lamb, a taciturn deaf old woman, whose temper sadly belied her surname, always, because of a natural thrawn-ness in her nature, made a point of being late on the half-holiday. She made no exception to her rule on this occasion. The broth due at 1.15 did not come in till 1.43, and the appearance of the beef, which should have been at 1.25, was proportionately delayed.

It was therefore well on to three o'clock before Mr. Dunwiddie, as he expressed it, got going. He had, however, done some thinking while he ate and drank. What perturbed him most was the sense of his solitude combined with that of the disadvantage under which he laboured in being tied to his duties in the shop during practically all the hours of daylight. It was true that, according to Mrs. Binnie's report, the activities of the man he was after all took place in the night-time. But apart from the difficulty of tracing anyone in the woods after dark, he had a very strong objection to doing so. His experience with Mrs. Abercrombie, far from lessening his indisposition in this direction, had immeasurably increased it. It would now, he felt, be

all but impossible for him to undertake the task, unless, at his back, he had co-operation and assistance. Nevertheless, because of what he had said to Mrs. Binnie, he hesitated to call in any professional aid, the more especially as it would have to come from a distance, the policeman responsible for Wood End and district being, at the time, one of the worst of the influenza patients. It would, besides, he felt, be unworthy of the force which he represented and deserving of the scorn of Young Ellen, if, when he had given his word, he let others redeem it. At the same time, in order to locate the enemy if possible, he decided to draw a cordon round the woods, to set other people on the watch, to establish communications, to make a web in the centre of which he would be as a spider on the alert.

The scheme pleased him well. It seemed to him impressive. He pictured Young Ellen listening to him describing it to her, when he should go over to the Dove-cote to make his call. And if, on consideration, he was seized with some misgiving as to the number and size of the loop-holes in his net, he comforted himself with the reflection that, if it caught nothing else, it would at least capture Young Ellen's imagination. For her benefit also, in the long interval between courses, he made a little field-map, with small dots for the points of observation, and a large one in the centre which represented his house. With a poet's licence he made these all look close together, and connected them with lines—presumably telepathic—for they could have been nothing else—and the effect was so reassuring and so inspiring that he could hardly wait afterwards to finish his beef.

His first point was a stone-breaker's house about a mile to the south, a lonely little place on the edge of the trees, and here, with his account of the characteristics of the person to be observed, he all but scared the stone-breaker's wife, who was a nervous woman, into fits. As she was, however, very reserved, and confined herself for the most part

to nodding her head in assent, he went on his way happily unconscious of the consternation he had left behind him.

The next point was none other than Cock-ma-lone—in his opinion a very important point. Who knew what assistance Mimy, if she could be induced to reveal her secret, might not render? What she would not confide to Mrs. Binnie she might confide to him, in his double capacity of old family friend and chief special constable. To his great surprise and confusion, however, for he had heard nothing of the events of the night, beyond what Mrs. Binnie had told him, the door was opened to him by no less a person than Mrs. Abercrombie.

She had doffed her shawls, but was still in her shortish petticoat, with a large towel worn over it apron-wise, and a red and white duster for head-dress. Her manner, however, was just as usual.

"Ah, Mr. Dunwiddie, I am glad to see you!" she said. "Had you come to see Mrs. Forgan perhaps? I am sorry she is not well—she has the flu, and is so weak after a dreadful night that it really would not be safe for you to see her. But I will take any message for her if I may. Do sit down, Mr. Dunwiddie."

"Andy," she then said in a stage-aside up the stair, "I can't come up yet—Mr. Dunwiddie is in. Just keep on as you are doing."

"Righto," said Andy's voice.

"Do sit down," repeated Mrs. Abercrombie.

"Thank you, M'm," said Mr. Dunwiddie, and sat down, after Mrs. Abercrombie had taken another seat. "I did not know ye was here, M'm, or I would not have intruded, but I've come as a special constable on the look-out for the same miscreant that I was in search o' the time you—the time we —first met, M'm."

"The same man!" Mrs. Abercrombie exclaimed. "What —haven't you found him yet?"

"No, M'm," said Mr. Dunwiddie with some stiffness. "To find a man in these woods is more easy said than

done. But he's taken noo to breathin' hard an' scarin' folk. That should sune finish him."

"Breathing hard and scaring folk?" said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Whatever do you mean?"

As she spoke the bedroom door creaked suddenly, but in the interest of the moment neither heard it. They did not even hear the creak made by the bed when Mimy, half-fainting, scrambled back into it.

"Whatever do you mean?" repeated Mrs. Abercrombie.

Mr. Dunwiddie recounted what Mrs. Binnie had told him.

"What a nasty man!" exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie. "Are you sure it *is* a man? Is it not a were-wolf or something? But no—of course you had warning—it's a German."

"Which is worse," said Mr. Dunwiddie.

"Far worse," she agreed. "Well—and you want Mrs. Forgan to be on the watch for him?"

"That's it, M'm," said Mr. Dunwiddie. "An' if she's ill, maybe Geordie——"

"I'm certain he will," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Thank God he's in quarantine, so he's at home from school and in his mother's room now looking after her. I'll tell him, and set him going for you. Is there nothing more I can do to help?"

"Nothing, M'm," said Mr. Dunwiddie, rising, "except," he added, "to come back soon to Wood End. There never was a time when a leddy like you, M'm, was more needit there."

"Nevertheless I'm afraid I shall not get back for some days," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Two of the children are ill upstairs and Mrs. Forgan is still very weak. Even when her aunt comes to-night she will not be able to spare me. But Miss Kinross will be at the Dove-cote and can bring messages to me—or Mr. Ascher. If she can't come—you can send Mr. Ascher."

"I will, M'm, an' thank ye kindly," said Mr. Dunwiddie.

"But I must be gettin' on, for I've still to go to Wood End Station an' then by train to Longshaws—and the Far Lodge an' two three more places."

"Well if they all watch as we shall," said Mrs. Abercrombie enthusiastically, "he's a captured man."

"And a punished man I hope, as he deserves to be," said Mr. Dunwiddie. "Frightenin' the young women."

"In other words, Young Ellen," said Mrs. Abercrombie to herself, as she closed the door after him. "Dear Mr. Dunwiddie! He's quite a knight errant."

. . . . . .

The ladder-like stair had hardly ceased creaking under Mrs. Abercrombie's ascending tread, and she was in the act of resuming her duties in the upper regions, when Geordie, seated sound asleep in a chair by his mother's bed, felt her shaking him violently by the arm next to her.

At first he could not bring himself to move. But his mother left him no peace, and presently he sat up drowsily.

Even then, however, he could not make out what she wanted, and when he did, he experienced a throb of the former anxiety, for her words were strange. A moment's observation however calmed him. She was quite cool, her eyes were as of old, her manner absolutely sane.

"Geordie," she said in her new weak low voice, that was but an echo of the old gay, resonant one. "Ye're no' very big, but ye've aye been sensible, an' I want ye to range roond the woods till ye find Bob Lindsay for me."

"Bob Lindsay!" exclaimed the boy. "But he's awa' to France, mither. He's no' in the woods. Ye maun be dreamin'."

"Whist or they'll hear," she replied. "He never went to France. He's no due to gang back for anither week. He jist wants a'body to think he's oot o' the country."

"To think he's oot o' the country?" repeated Geordie amazed. "But what for?"

"I met him," said Mimy, taking no notice of his questions, "the day afore I took badly when I was gaitherin'

sticks in the wood. An' he said he would think nothing o' shootin' me if I let on he was there, for he'd got to find oot afore he left what Young Ellen's game was."

"Ay," prompted Geordie as his mother paused as though in gloomy contemplation of one of the knobs of the bed. "Young Ellen's games . . ."

"I let him cairry on aboot her," said Mimy after a moment, "an' that was wrang o' me, Geordie; but I never likit Young Ellen, an' I never can pit past the thocht that yer feyther had his supper there that first nicht he cam' hame, an' never sent word to me that he was comin'."

"Noo, mither," said Geordie, "ye said ye would never speak o' that again. Ye promised feyther. . . ."

"Ay, I promised," said Mimy, "but ye canna help thinkin' whiles. A' the same I had nae richt to let Bob miscall Ellen. An' I was a rank coward to promise no' to tell he was spyin' on her. A rank coward, Geordie."

"No, no, mither," said Geordie soothingly.

"If he does anybody a injury," said Mimy, becoming more and more excited, "it's me that'll be to blame, Geordie."

"No, no, mither," said Geordie once more.

"Haud yer tongue, laddie!" exclaimed his mother. "I ken what I'm sayin', an' I want ye to gang an' tell Bob that he's been seen an' heard . . . an' they're a' oot efter him . . . an' that if he doesna clear oot quick . . . he'll be captured . . . that's the word—*captured,* for a German!"

"But wha's oot efter him?" said Geordie, his little blue eyes glinting like a terrier's.

"Oh, a'body," said Mimy. "Roond an' roond the wood they are. They're makin' a chain, an' they're closin' in on him. Soon he'll no' be able, tell him, to get past them."

"But, mither," said Geordie, whose presence of mind never failed him. "If I tell him a' this he'll ken ye've telt me aboot him, an' did he no' say that he would shoot ye if ye let on? They say, ye ken, that he aye cairries a revolver."

"I'm no' carin'," said Mimy recklessly. "I would raythe**r** he shot me than that we should a' be disgraced by folk comin' to hairm through me bein' a rank coward. I would raythe**r** be dead that daft, an' it's proper daft I would get if Young Ellen was shot instead o' me. . . . Deed I'd raythe**r** be shot now onyway."

She turned away from him with her face to the wall.

"Noo, mither," said Geordie, who since his father's departure had had experience of such moods, trying to turn her round again. "Ye ken ye dinna mean that. What would we a' dae—us bairns an' feyther—if Bob Lindsay was to shoot ye?"

"Oh, yer feyther would get Young Ellen then," said Mimy, "an' you bairns would a' be glad to ha' her for yer mither."

"Noo, mither," said Geordie very firmly, "if ye dinna talk sense I'll no' listen to ye. What's mair, I'll no tak' nae message to Bob Lindsay. An' so I tell ye."

He stood up very determined.

Instantly Mimy's mood changed again. She held out her arms to him, and as he did not relax, she clasped his small hard hand between both of hers.

"It's jist you thwartin' me, Geordie," she said, weeping. "I canna staund it."

She seemed to be flushing into a fever again before his eyes.

"I'm no' thwartin' ye, mither," he said hastily. "Whaur d'ye think I micht find him?"

"It was in the fir-plantin' I saw him," said Mimy brokenly. "But Mrs. Binnie saw him on the road near Broadlees, an' Young Ellen heard him last nicht at Wood End."

"Oh, ay," said Geordie, and no more.

The places mentioned comprised an area of about six square miles.

"Weel, so long, mither," he added after a moment, and yielding to her he bent down while she flung her arms round his neck, and covered his plain little face with kisses.

"Noo quiet yersel' an' sleep," he said. "I'll mak' it a' richt."

. . . . . .

When he had closed the bedroom door behind him the envoy stood in thought for a short space, and the result was that he mounted the ladder-stair and asked Mrs. Abercrombie if she would speak a moment.

Mrs. Abercrombie came hastily.

"Your mother isn't worse, is she?" she said anxiously.

"No," said Geordie, "but she's forgot a message that should ha' been at the Far Lodge yesterday an' she wants me to tak' it noo."

"The Far Lodge?" exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie. "But that's right at the other end of the wood, isn't it?"

"Ay, thereaboot," said Geordie.

"And it's nearly dark already. Surely she cannot mean you to start off now. Wait—I will see her. . . ."

And Mrs. Abercrombie prepared to descend.

Geordie, however, immediately barred her path.

"No, if ye please, M'm," he said. "She's fair excitit aboot it. It's a—important message. It's makin' her no' weel?"

"Oh, then, if that's the case," said Mrs. Abercrombie hesitating. "But you must have some tea first, or at least take some food with you. I will not allow you to go a step without that."

"I wouldna gang withoot it," said Geordie. "I ha' mair sense."

And before he left, he crammed into his pockets some cheese and the heel of a loaf.

. . . . . .

Auntie Been, whose name was short for Robina, her niece told them, came just after they had finished tea and proved to be a woman after Mrs. Abercrombie's own heart.

"She's a regular old dear," she said to Andy. "The children simply leapt at her, and Mrs. Forgan wept with joy at

seeing her, which was uncomplimentary to us of course, but satisfactory all the same."

Andy laughed. She was setting Auntie Been's tea.

"Then are we to consider ourselves dismissed?" she said.

"I am not," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Auntie Been has asked me to stay another night at least until she has redd her feet. What that means exactly I am not quite sure; but, in case it's something else uncomplimentary, I shan't ask her."

Andy laughed again.

"Am I to go, then?" she said.

"Yes, my dear, whenever you wish," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "I shall feel happier here if the fugue demon is being satisfied, and Ascher—poor Ascher—having the benefit of playing to you."

"Benefit!" exclaimed Andy. "It is I who am benefitting all the time. It's so different hearing music like that, to hearing it in little scraps at concerts. I feel as though only now I had begun to understand what it is."

"Ah, my dear," said Mrs. Abercrombie, "you'll feel that many a time. All art, all life, you'll find—is made up o' beginnings. But look, we've let the kettle boil over an' splash all the hearth for poor Auntie Been—who I can se though she is grateful to us, already thinks we are dash bad housekeepers."

. . . . . .

Andy left soon afterwards, walked home without incident, and was received as though she had been Florence Nightingale by Young Ellen.

"To think o' you an' Mrs. Abercrombie never closin' an eye all night!" she exclaimed.

"Well—speaking for myself—" began Andy.

But Ellen simply would not listen to her.

"All I can say is," she said, "that I never heard anything like it."

On her supper-table Andy found a note from Ascher.

"Dear Miss Kinross," it ran, "may I come and play to

you for a little? What that child said is haunting me, and I cannot get away from it. Of course I shall understand, however, if you are too tired. Forgive my asking you, but I could not help it."

Andy thrilled as she read the words, as one might thrill on hearing an involuntary cry for help, out of the very depths.

"He shall have it," she said, and sent an answer by Young Ellen. Then, though she had felt too tired to do so before, she did up her hair again and changed into her red gown. All the time she was doing this she was remembering his face as he had come to her in the night with his terrible question, and wondering, even while she rejoiced at it, that he was feeling like playing.

"The thought of his sorrow must be like an intermittent disease," she said to herself, "which leaves him sane and fit between—otherwise he would go under. . . . How will it all end? Is Germany to have him or Mr. Carruthers? In the meantime—" she paused for a moment, looking thoughtfully at her own face in the glass.

"In the meantime it will be strange to hear him play the nocturnes again—after last night. . . ."

Ascher, however, did not play the nocturnes.

He was not in the mood for them, he said. He was only in the mood, it seemed, for weird discordant things that gave her a headache and made her feel strained and sad.

"What is that? Is it Scriabine?" she said wearily, in one of his abrupt pauses. But he did not answer, and she became aware that he was for the moment forgetting her, and simply playing his heart out. A strange, wild heart it was. She was almost glad when he rose and closed the piano with the air of one abandoning an attempt.

"I can do nothing to-night," he said, looking at her with unconscious yet desperate appeal in his eyes. "I cannot even play to *you*."

Again Andy thrilled. She had not known she was a last

resource. She sat down by the fire in Mrs. Abercrombie's deserted place, and thence considered him gravely for a moment.

"No," she said. "I know what you want to-night. It's not playing, it's the fugue demon. You want to be possessed."

"Possessed?" he exclaimed.

"Yes," said Andy. "I often am, myself, and I know it is exactly what you want."

"What is it like?" he said.

She smiled at him. At that moment she felt years older —like his mother in fact.

"It's like this," she said. "When I begin writing a fugue, I have sometimes not gone beyond the statement of the subject and answer before something takes me out of myself and whirls me away, so that I forget everything earthly except the notes I am writing down."

She paused as she became aware of the expression on his face.

"But has your demon power to drive out another possession?" he said. "For I am possessed already by that, 'everything earthly' that you forget, by the horror, and terror, and fiendish cruelty of fate."

The last words were in a whisper.

Andy rose hastily, a heavy sense of doom impending urging her to assuage his pain while she could yet do so, to relieve his oppression, even if it were only for a space.

"Try my fugue demon," she said as lightly as she could, and, going over to a side-table, she brought back writing materials. "Let's both do one," she went on. Then glancing at the clock, "We'll have time yet. Here's a pencil and a subject." She turned over the pages of the Bach. "We'll both take the same one and compare—literally compare notes afterwards. Now—are you ready?"

As she expected, however, he was not ready.

"Surely you forget," he said, "that I can't compose—I never wrote anything original in my life."

"No—it is you who are forgetting," she returned, sitting down opposite to him at the table, "that to write fugues—*some* fugues—requires no originality!"

He laughed in spite of himself, then came over to the table and sat down.

"Let go then," he said almost gaily. "Bring on your fugue subject."

"Be patient," said Andy. "You shall have it as soon as I have copied it."

She was as good as her word, and then there was silence save for the faint crackling of the fire and the slight sounds of their pencils upon the music-paper.

The demon, however, confined himself to Ascher, as Andy very soon became aware. It was one thing to describe the effect of a fugue upon her, and quite another to experience it with Ascher sitting opposite. She found it impossible to ignore him—not to look up when he did, not to smile when he smiled, not to reply, when, now and again, he said—

"By Jove, I've got it this time!" or, "I say—that's not so bad!"

All this was distracting enough, but it was not nearly so much so as the sense of his gradual exhilaration. She could not help watching him as little by little the work absorbed him. She could not help noting how he would sometimes bend down over it, leaning his folded arms on the table, knitting his brows, twisting his mouth, biting his lips, in the full frenzy of composition, and again sometimes lean back to look critically at completed lines, absently smoothing his hair back from his forehead.

Thus Ascher, all unknown to himself, came for the second time between Andy and her work, and this time as no shadowy ghost, but real, substantial down to the smallest detail. Instead of competing with him whole-heartedly she found herself making a mental catalogue of her opponent. Instead of being absorbed in her modulations she found herself noting his changes of expression. Instead of watch-

ing where she could introduce figures of imitation she found herself watching a hundred other things—the lines that suffering had drawn upon his face, the strong yet sensitive moulding of his mouth and chin, the streaks of white in the fair hair over his forehead, the shabbiness of his neck-tie, the old-fashioned cut of his collar, the thread-bare appearance of his grey tweed elbows, his hand so slight and yet so strong, even the manner in which he held his pencil. . . .

All the while, nevertheless, she was busy with her own fugue, working with the same dogged perseverance with which she had handled her last one. Her success, however, was even less than it had been before.

"Any of Aunt Em's blithering idiots could have written this," she said to herself as she looked it over.

She said nothing aloud, however, being afraid of interrupting Ascher's fugue, which by this time was progressing with the utmost fluency. She pretended to go on writing, therefore, while the clock ticked away the hours, till at last, about a quarter to midnight, Ascher started up.

"Good Heavens!" he exclaimed, looking in dismay at the time.

Andy laughed.

"Are you better?" she said.

"Better?" he said, and he drew a long breath. There was the gratitude, almost adoration, in his eyes of one who has been delivered from torture.

"Better?" he repeated. "I am cured."

Even as he spoke, however, the shadow seemed again to fall upon his face.

"For the time," he added, but still trying to smile.

"Continue the cure to-morrow, then," she said lightly as she gave him her hand in farewell. "It's too late to-night to go on with it. But to-morrow the demon will await you."

. . . . . .

Downstairs he found Young Ellen waiting to lock up and enjoying, from where she stood in the passage, a view of the moon through the open door. She was reflecting that

it would be her honey-moon, since Mr. Dunwiddie had duly called and informed her without preamble of the arrangements for the wedding. She was so absorbed in contemplation that she did not hear Ascher, and exclaimed in surprise when he appeared—

"Oh, sir," she said when she had recovered herself, "I was goin' to ask if ye would do me a favour. Would ye play music for me at my weddin'? My uncle was to ha' done it. He's a real pretty player, but he'll no' be back in time. So I would be awful obliged if you would do it—the weddin's to be next Thursday."

"Most certainly—of course I will," said Ascher. Then recollecting himself, he said, "That is, if I am still here on Thursday."

"Oh, sir—*do* be here," said Young Ellen. "I've kind o' set my heart on it. The rest o' the weddin's to be that dreich. It'll no' be like a weddin' at a'. Jist the MacKendricks from Longshaws, for he's to be best man, an' the minister, an' the folk in the hoose, no' a' them either likely, for Mr. Carruthers'll forget to come, an' nae sugar on the cake, an' nae dressin' up—deed if there's to be nae music I'm jist no' *for* the weddin'!"

"But couldn't Miss Kinross be asked to play if I had to go?" said Ascher, laughing a little, for he had heard of some of the vicissitudes of this wedding.

"Eh, no, sir," exclaimed Ellen. "I would rayther ha' nae music. The kind Miss Kinross plays would mak' me fair affrontit."

Ascher laughed again.

"Very well," he said, "I'll stay, till then. That's settled."

"Eh, thank ye, sir," said Young Ellen. "And," she added as he went away, "it's rale kind, an' I'll no' forget it."

Till he had disappeared into Mr. Carruthers's end she stood still for a time, as in a dream, contemplating, till

suddenly remembering how very late it was, she withdrew into the house again and locked the door after her.

For a moment all was still outside. Then, from a laurel bush half-way down the garden a shadow detached itself, and gliding along quietly slipped out of Mr. Carruthers's gate, just as a smaller one creeping out from under a rhododendron made a hurried exit through Mrs. Binnie's.

CHAPTER XIII

IN WHICH GEORDIE FORGAN DOES HIS BIT AND ANDY PRAYS FOR HER OWN SOUL

THE shadow which, to save words, we may call the rhododendron one, was of course none other than Geordie Forgan, who, with that astuteness which belonged to him, had selected the environs of the Dove-cote as the headquarters of his expedition.

"If it's spyin' he's efter," Geordie had said to himself, "it'll be little use me trailin' up an' doon the woods lookin' for him. A' I have to dae is jist to let him come to me, an' tak' my chance near Young Ellen."

Therefore, while Mrs. Abercrombie was imagining him tramping wearily in the direction of the Far Lodge, and his mother, tossing in her bed, was picturing him in worse situations, Geordie was already established in his coign of vantage eating his first ration of bread and cheese in comparative comfort. Anticipating that he might have to remain stationary till morning, he had come prepared to do so. In a farm-yard on the way along he had found two dry sacks in a place where he knew he would find them, and had brought them with him. One of these served him as a ground-sheet and the other as an extra wrap. It was very cold, nevertheless, as he was just beginning to realise, when a slight sound near him warned him that something was going to happen.

The laurel bush was some distance off, but the ground was hard with frost and the night very still. Bob's footsteps, when he took up his position, were quite audible in

the rhododendron, and at the first sound of them Geordie sat up and prepared for immediate action.

The action to his disgust, however, consisted in sitting for a long time motionless, seeing nothing and hearing nothing in the least extraordinary, though he was staring with all his eyes and listening with all his ears. Bob seemed to have been turned to stone. The laurel never so much as rustled. At last, fearing that he had been mistaken, and that the footsteps had existed only in his imagination, he crawled along to reconnoitre, and distinctly saw Bob standing. He looked—so still was he—like a tree himself, withdrawn from the moonlight, portentous, awesome.

Geordie lost no time in scuttling back to his place, where he sat down again, realising the seriousness of his undertaking.

"Will his revolver be trained on the house?" he wondered as he remembered his father's tales of machine-guns, and the thought came to him that it would be very unpleasant if Young Ellen were shot dead before his eyes. More than that, it would be disastrous. His mother would never forgive him. What would be worse, she would never forgive herself. All her life she would be miserable. . . .

The thought went to his head, and he had actually risen to go and deliver his message there and then, when he was given pause by another consideration.

Bob Lindsay, in the mood he was in, might shoot the first person he saw. In his male parent he had more than once witnessed this state of mind. His father, he felt certain, when worked up as Bob must be worked up now, standing there with a revolver in his hand, would be quite capable of letting fly at the first comer. And if Bob did let fly, where would the message be then? for Bob had been a good shot long before he had gone for a soldier.

What use would it be to Young Ellen if he—Geordie—was shot? What would be the good to himself? She would never even know he had died for her. He would not even be a hero. Besides, it would not prevent Bob

shooting her afterwards if he wished, and his mother after that, for, though it was unlikely Bob would recognise him, as he had hardly ever seen him, it was not impossible.

Clearly the only thing to be done was to await a less unpropitious moment, and Geordie was rearranging the sack around him when, to his horror, the door of Mrs. Binnie's end opened, and Young Ellen herself, looking in the kindly moonlight really young as well as pretty, came tripping out with Andy's message.

"Now then!" said Geordie to himself, and he held his breath till Young Ellen reached the door of Mr. Carruthers's end in safety. It must have been standing open, for she did not knock, but went in quickly, and did not reappear for several minutes. Then she returned, however, walked slowly back, and disappeared again into Mrs. Binnie's.

"He's no' for shootin' yet onyway," said Geordie to himself as the door banged after her, and so relieved was he that, being almost frozen, he slipped out on to the road and ran down the empty street to warm himself.

As he came back headlong, he all but ran into Bob, who, for the same reason as his own, was coming out of Mrs. Binnie's gate. Geordie, supposing him to be in pursuit of himself, was very badly scared. Fear, however, always had the effect of making him recklessly impertinent.

"If Geordie was pit intil a cage wi' a roarin' lion he would set up cheek till him," Mimy had often said.

He did not fall below himself on this occasion.

"Mind yersel'!" he said sharply, though he was four feet nothing and Bob over six feet two at least.

. . . . . .

They had both been back at their posts again for some time when Ascher came out of Mr. Carruthers's end and went into Mrs. Binnie's, after which, for a time, faint sounds of music could be heard from the back of the house where the sitting-room was. Soon, however, there was silence. Yet Ascher did not come out again. They heard the eight-

day clock in Mrs. Binnie's kitchen strike eleven. Still he did not come. At last, however, when Geordie's teeth had began to chatter, and he was feeling chilled to the bone, a sound of voices just inside the door galvanized him once more into attention.

The speakers were in the passage still. No words could be distinguished, but, even before they appeared on the doorstep, Geordie knew that they were Ascher and Young Ellen. He knew too that Bob Linsday had moved and was leaning forward, and again he had to hold his breath, even to bite his lip, to keep himself from crying out. But once more the moment passed. Ascher returned to the Other End, and Young Ellen left the doorstep.

The watch for that night then seemed to be concluded, for, hardly had the door banged, when Bob moved out from behind the laurel. At the same instant Geordie realised that here at last was his opportunity, and, as Bob emerged on to the high road from the gate nearest to him, Geordie made for Mrs. Binnie's gate. As he did so, he saw that Bob had his back to him, that he was striding down the road in the opposite direction, and that if all his—Geordie's—waiting and watching were not to be in vain, he must make up to him and say what he had to say to him. His brain felt numb, his teeth were chattering, his legs were so stiff he could hardly walk, much less run.

"A' the same," he said grimly, "something's got to tak' place." And, with clenched fists and head down, he presently charged into the enemy.

The giant turned in a fury.

"Damn you—is that you again?" he exclaimed, when he saw the size of his assailant. "Mind you *yoursel'* this time!" he added, as he plunged his hand into his pocket.

Geordie here shut his eyes so that he might not see the revolver which he was certain must be pointed at him. His power of speech, however, he was glad to find was still unimpaired.

"Eh, mercy, it's the German!" he exclaimed, his voice breaking on the last word into a thin squeak.

"The *German?*" exclaimed Bob, and Geordie heard that he had produced some effect.

"But eh, sir, dinna kill me!" he went on with tragic eagerness, "for ye'll get naebody else to tell ye what I'll tell ye. They're a' oot to catch ye. They're makin' a ring roond the woods. But if ye'll jist let me be—I'll help ye."

The silence was so prolonged, after he had finished this speech, that Geordie risked opening his eyes again. No revolver was visible, but Bob's hand was still in his pocket.

"Help me, then," he said. "Tell me who are looking for me?"

"There's Mr. Dunwiddie, sir," said Geordie eagerly, letting his imagination loose, for he had no further information, "an' Scratton, the stane-breaker, and his wife, an' the MacKendricks at Longshaws Station, an' Gibbie the porter there, and—and—Mrs. Abercrombie."

"Mrs. Abercrombie!" exclaimed Bob. "Never!"

"Ay—Mrs. Abercrombie—certain!" said Geordie.

"Lord help me!" said Bob. "And there'll be you, I suppose," he added.

"No, sir," said Geordie with desperate fervour. "I'm a conscientious objector."

"A what?" exclaimed Bob, and it was as though the revolver had gone off. "Turn round to the light there then, an' let me see one. . . . An' what may your name be, sonny?" he added suddenly, as the light fell on the boy's face.

"John Canterbury," said Geordie promptly, taking the names that came uppermost, which were two of the last with which his master at school had crammed him.

"Ah—well, John," said Bob pleasantly, "if you'll jist tak' a canter roond yer ootposts, an' tell them a' to keep quiet, I'll slip through, and you'll be done wi' me. And," he went on as Geordie was about to depart, "if ye ken a Mistress Forgan hereaboot, tell her the man she met gaitherin'

sticks last week doesna care noo whether she lets on or no'; for he has found oot a' he needit!"

"An' by jing, mither, he went off as quiet's a lamb!" said Geordie triumphantly when he told the story. "Of coorse I never went to nae ootposts. I jist followed him withoot him seein' me, till I saw him tak' the train to Edinburgh at Cauldshields Station."

"Cauldshields!" exclaimed Mimy. "Bairn! Did ye tramp efter him a' they miles?"

"Aye, an' I would tramp twice as far for you, mither," said the son, after which of course he had to submit to inordinate hugging and kissing.

"Wha kens but ye've saved yere mither from death an' disgrace," said Mimy brokenly, as she wiped her eyes after this outburst.

"No, no, mither," said Geordie, diplomatic to the last. "It wasna me that shiftit him, it was jist scunner at Young Ellen."

* . . . . . .

Next day the frost was gone and heavy rain was pouring down upon the woods. Each day broke as gloomily as the last, and so still that the light drip, drip of the water could be heard everywhere in the village and on the roads under the trees. Nothing seemed to flourish but the influenza, which spread over the whole neighbourhood like a blight. Even the grave-digger took it, so that the dead had to wait for strangers to prepare their last resting-places. The street stood thick with pools, and at one point where the drain was stopped up by withered leaves a great lake stood across the highway. Even the Dove-cote looked drenched and dreary, and the rain sounded louder than anywhere on its laurel bushes. Mrs. Abercrombie shivered at the sight of it, when she arrived home from Cock-ma-lone in the reeking station cab. As it came splashing through the pools, up the empty street, half-drowned fowls went scattering before it.

"And really it was quite a relief to see them, poor dears,"

she said to Andy afterwards, "for if they had not been there, I should have thought there had been another flood, and that not a soul was left this time except me and my driver."

This is anticipating, however, for Mrs. Abercrombie did not return till the Wednesday—the day before Young Ellen's wedding. Much rain had dripped before then from the trees, much water run down the swollen brooks below the bridges.

The fugue demon, so far as he had gone, had done his work well. Mr. Carruthers, eagerly on the watch, perceived a change for the better in his assistant, and was sensible o' nights of a strange lightening in the burden which Ascher's unhappiness caused to weigh upon him also.

"What are you doing now in the evenings at the Other End?" he said one morning when Ascher, coming to see if he were awake, found him lying cogitating. "You seem never to play anything now, except fragmentary counterpoint."

Ascher laughed.

"You will never guess, sir," he said. "I am writing. I, who never thought of writing fugues before, or anything else indeed. I—we—are competing."

He told him then about the demon.

"I have discovered—or have had discovered for me," he went on, his eyes becoming dreamy, "a wonderful faculty—the faculty of becoming possessed, so that I remember—I care for nothing else at the moment."

Mr. Carruthers clasped his hands behind his head, and settled himself more comfortably among his pillows.

"Am I to understand," he said then, "that this counterpoint has this effect—this fugue—this, whatever you call it?"

"Yes," said Ascher.

"Strange," said Mr. Carruthers. "What the Investigation cannot do, what the mystery and the wonder and the fas-

cination and the glory of plumbing the depths of the ages cannot accomplish—this—scribbling can."

The word scribbling was spoken with vindictive emphasis.

"How do you account for it?" said Mr. Carruthers.

"I don't account for it," said Ascher. "I only experience it."

"And yet you never thought of counterpointing before," said Mr. Carruthers, after a moment's silence, "never for pleasure I mean. You never felt impelled towards it. You have no original genius for musical composition."

"Not a particle," said Ascher. "I can criticise, but compose I cannot."

"Yet you find that it absorbs you more than playing does—more than interpreting the works of others?"

"It relieves me more," said Ascher. "Though why it is so I cannot tell you. It may be that these works you speak of are too full of the sorrow that is my sorrow. Out of their great grief they have made their little songs. With the fugue-writing it is different. It is a tour de force merely."

"As, yes," said Mr. Carruthers, regarding him fixedly. "A competition—I understand. And every time, of course, Miss Kinross will beat you."

"No, sir," said Ascher, laughing a little at his manner. "I cannot honestly say that Miss Kinross has beaten me yet."

"That's strange, too," said Mr. Carruthers. "I thought you said she was a genius."

"So she is," said Ascher, frowning perplexedly. "It *is* strange, when you come to think of it."

At this, without warning, Mr. Carruthers took up one of his pillows, and dashed it violently upon the floor.

"Damnation!" he said then. "Well, get along now, for I can't stop in bed all day, though there will be nothing to do when I am up, but read, read, read I suppose."

Ascher did not move.

"I am distressed, sir," he said, "at this break in your work. Can it be because of me? Am I being a hindrance to you?"

At this Mr. Carruthers fairly laughed aloud.

"My dear Ascher," he said, "why, of course you are. You are, I believe now, the only hindrance, the one thing between me and the light. If I could feel that you were free and happy, I too would be free."

"Yet you ask me to stay, sir," exclaimed Ascher passionately. "Why did you not send me away at the beginning?"

"God knows it might have been better," said Mr. Carruthers.

"It is not too late, sir," said Ascher, very pale. "Fulfil your promise, lend me money for the journey, and before night I shall have left you—passed out of your life and the Investigation altogether."

Mr. Carruthers was silent for a moment, smiling strangely.

"No, Ascher," he said at last, "that is quite impossible. It is too late for that. Don't you see, boy, that I have come to—care for you—that it is for this reason that the thought of your misery weighs me down, holds me back, intervenes between me and full enlightenment. Would it intervene less, do you think, if you went forth from me with those brilliant powers of yours, with all those qualities that would be of invaluable service to me, in order to take your place in the ranks of those who deserve nothing of mankind but punishment and the direst infamy?"

"But, sir," said Ascher much moved, "what then would you have me do? If I stay, I am a hindrance to you, too. God help me, there is no place for me in the world except in the ranks you speak of."

"That is not true," said Mr. Carruthers, sitting suddenly up in his bed, tousled, grizzled, yet somehow impressive. "That is nevermore true. On the contrary, it is a damned lie. Your place is here. You are in the clutch of circum-

stance at this moment—but are you not a man? Are you not a soul—which, though your present brain is not capable of remembering it, has probably many and many a time risen through such temporary entanglements, which has seen wars upon wars and all that they bring with them, wars, which like volcanic fires and fearful earthquakes, are full of what seems senseless destruction and fiendish cruelty, yet accomplish a definite purpose? Good heavens, man, look round—all nature is full of cruelty—all history. Your countrymen are not the only human fiends. In my own little Scottish town of Rathness, not so long ago, either, things were done that equalled in horror anything I have heard of in connection with this war."

"But not to-day," said Ascher. "Not in modern times, and not by order, not by a whole people. . . ."

"What is to-day?" said Mr. Carruthers. "Before we know it, it will be to-morrow, and the day that was to-day will be lost in the past, and the things done in it forgotten or excused. Rightly or wrongly, my dear Ascher, this is so. As for things done by order by a whole people—What about Rome and the Christian massacres? What about Spain and the Dutch republic? Yet it is not thought a disgrace to-day to be either a Roman or a Spaniard . . . No . . . What is done is done, my dear Ascher. You cannot help it. Let the dead past bury its dead, all of the past that would clog and hamper us. We, who are pioneers, must escape from it, come what may; we must rise through it as the green blade does, through layers of death, set only upon reaching the light."

"By God, sir," said Ascher, "when you speak like that I feel as though I could do it. It is just that—perhaps I am not a pioneer by nature—there are times that——"

"We all have such times," said Mr. Carruthers. "I myself have had such times, when the finite things of every day bulk so largely as to obscure the infinite. I am passing through one of these times now because of you, Ascher, —and therefore I have a right to ask that you pray to your

Maker to set free your soul, that it may rise to this occasion and deliver you from your earthly self."

. . . . . .

That night—the last before Mrs. Abercrombie's return, Andy waited long for Ascher.

At first, however, she did not notice how late he was, for she had had a letter by the evening post. It was from Archie.

"My Dearest," it ran. "Your last has just come, and as I have a few minutes I must just answer it. You ask how we are getting on. We are getting on splendidly—you understand,—genuinely—no camouflage. In a few weeks—a few days, perhaps—but enough of that now. It's you, my darling, I want to talk about.

"I can't tell you how glad I am you are having this splendid chance—surely it is one in a thousand—of having a real musician to help you, and how proud I am that he thinks it worth while—and bucks you up about your work. That will be more help to you than anything.

"But, dear—I'm just human, you know, and I'm not musical—at least what *you* call musical, though you know how I would love to hear this Ascher of yours playing. (Now don't be angry at my saying he is yours—of course he is—every one is who comes anywhere near you) and—when I read about all this I just feel what impudence I had to ask you to tie yourself to such a common-placer as I am, and what an angel you were to say you would have me. And I ask myself whether you are not too much of an angel—whether you have been too good perhaps, and have done what you are sorry for, and would like to undo, if you were not too unselfish and dear and sweet? And I want to say to you, my darling, that if this is so I would rather know—though I think you know what it would mean to me to lose you. Anything would be better than that you should suffer. I could never learn music, but I have learned to love you, Andy, more and more every day, every hour, till it has come to this, that if I thought I was standing

between you and any happiness, and that you were sacrificing yourself for me, I should see that I never came back."

Andy laid this letter on the table before her and sat gazing at it, motionless and silent, like one who, long aware of inexplicable sensations, has been suddenly told that they are symptoms of the end of all things. Her mind was filled with overwhelming wonder that this, which had come upon her, had been hidden until now, as, illumined, explained, by Archie's words, the fateful hours of the last week—of her companionship with Ascher—passed slowly in review before her. She saw all the little happenings, the infinite moments of those few days, in a new white light that revealed to her their real significance, and, looking round with amazement, she realised that awakening had come at last—awakening strange and wonderful. The very room had changed. It had become a haunted place, filled and dominated by one presence.

"It has become possessed now," she said softly to herself, using the old phrase in a new sense. So had the whispering woods outside, the scent of wet ivy-leaves coming in at the open window, the tick of the clock, the crackle of the fire, the lamplight falling on the ink-splashed tablecloth.

Yet there, in the midst, was Archie's letter. Sorrow gripped her at the sight of it, self-reproach, regret, and, seizing pen and paper, she wrote an answer to it straight off, not without tears, not without a sob or two, but without pause or hesitation.

"Archie," she wrote. "Your letter has just come, and as it lies beside me here on the table it seems to me as though you yourself were with me. It is so like you, so splendid, so straight and fine, that I must answer it at once and truly, though you should never again write to me.

"Archie, I knew from the first that I was not worthy of you, but when you sent me back to my music, I realised

just how unworthy I was. A love like yours should have a love like itself in return. Mine was not anything like yours, Archie. When I got deep into my music it was still first with me. I could think of nothing else, not even of you for the time being. I almost wrote then and told you this. If it had not been for Aunt Em I would have written then. She said this would pass—that it did not matter—that—oh—she said all kinds of reassuring things. But something has happened since that has changed everything, something that, after your letter of to-night, you must know and immediately. . . . This Ascher—my Ascher as you call him, though he is not mine, Archie—he cares nothing for me—you see I am telling you everything to the very bottom, this Ascher is a German, one of the most hated class. He was fighting at the front—fighting against us—he was cast ashore at Rathness from a U-boat. And yet I love him, Archie—I have come to love him. . . . It was his playing first, I think, but it was not only that. It was Aunt Em's description of him as well, of him coming to her a waif out of the night. Then Mr. Carruthers came and told me he was a German, but that nevertheless he was akin to all that was true and good, and somehow I felt as though I had known that from the first. And so when Mr. Carruthers asked me not to tell Aunt Em, because he wanted to keep him here to help him, and because Aunt Em, as president of a branch of the British Empire Union, would be bound to denounce him and have him sent away —I did not tell her. I have been mean and underhand to dear Aunt Em, even to you, Archie. And if necessary I would do it again for him. I do not ask you to forgive me, only to forget, to forget as soon as possible. But one thing I would ask for the sake of what is past. Do not betray the secret I have told you about Ascher's nationality to Aunt Em or anybody. You can safely keep it. He is what Mr. Carruthers said, akin to all that is noblest. He will not betray *you*. . . . As for me, I am going away—not to-morrow, for that is Young Ellen's wedding-day; and they have

been so good and kind that I should not like to go till their great event is over. But next morning I shall go, never to return here, never to see him again on earth. It is strange that it is I who should bring this upon you, I who would have given the world to make you happy. But I cannot help it, and you are so true and honest that I cannot pretend to you. . . . Good-bye, Archie."

It was only when she came back, after having gone across the street in the rain to post this, that, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece, she saw that it was after nine.

"My Ascher has not come," she said bitterly, quoting Archie's jesting words.

Then, standing at the mantelpiece, gazing down into the fire, she realised that she must get used to his not coming, to his never more needing her, to being no more able to help him.

She ought to be glad, she told herself, that he had not come to-night, that he required her and her fugues no longer, that her going away would make no difference to him.

But she was not glad . . . she was not glad. . . .

Looking up in a kind of agony she met the sad eyes of Beethoven glooming down upon her, and for the first time it seemed to her as though they were full of wistfulness.

"You knew," she whispered. "You knew what it was to be not wanted."

She could stand there no longer. She went over to the window and, snatching aside the curtain, gazed out into the rainy night. . . . A faint breeze was stirring—presage perhaps of better weather—but it seemed to her that a sigh went up from the woods—a sigh of resignation. She dragged the curtain close again. . . . A moment later she had begun to pace the room in a passion of rebellious grief too deep for tears or speech. Then suddenly she stopped short. What if he had gone—gone mysteriously as he had come—gone without farewell?

But even as the thought passed through her mind with a stab of sharp despair, she heard his footstep on the stair, and at the sound a great calm fell upon her. . . .

As she turned to meet him, it seemed to her as though he must know what had just passed, as though the room must be a-thrill with it. At once, however, when she saw him, she became aware that, for the moment, she was not foremost in his thoughts. All about him there was a strange aloofness. So might the disciples have appeared when they came down from the Mount of Transfiguration.

"What have you been doing?" she said almost involuntarily, so evident was it that something new had befallen him. Then a terror seized her of what he might be about to tell her, of what fresh calamity he might be going to announce.

"What have you been doing?" she said again, with beating heart, yet, realising with a strange joy, that whatever it was, he had come to her with it, come instinctively apparently, almost unconsciously perhaps. . . .

He paused for a moment still before replying, looking at her abstractedly as though recalling his thoughts from a far distance.

"Doing?" he said at last. "I was praying, praying to be released from my earthly self."

"Praying to be released?" she said awestricken.

"I had never prayed like that before," said Ascher, his eyes, though they were meeting hers, still vague and mystical. "It was very wonderful."

"It helped you?" she said almost in a whisper, for she was breathless with apprehension.

"Yes," he said, "it gave me a tremendous feeling of companionship with something infinitely great, infinitely high, infinitely powerful."

"With God," said Andy.

"Yes," he replied; "but what helped me most was the wonderful sense of my own soul rising to meet this great Companion. For the first time I became conscious of One

under God who is myself—whom I recognise as part of me, one who, nevertheless, has no need of anything earthly."

"Not even of music?" said Andy in spite of herself.

"No—curious, is it not?—not even of music," he said.

Then after a moment he added—

"Which is well, for I must get past that."

"Past that?" said Andy.

"Yes," said Ascher, "I am to be a pioneer. If I am to be of any use to Mr. Carruthers I must rise through all that is past."

"Yes, yes," said Andy eagerly, "but not music surely. Why—he loves music—he loves you to play to him."

"Yes," said Ascher. "But he will be willing to forego that. If I am to be a pioneer, if I am not to hinder him, I must never play again."

"Never play again?" exclaimed Andy aghast. "But why?"

"Because I cannot," said Ascher, "if I am to be what he wants me to be. Music you see—" he paused for a moment, "is the very essence of all I want to forget."

She did not answer, and they sat for a moment in silence, while the rain pattered down steadily on the woods.

"I must go," said Ascher at length, but, as he lifted his eyes to her face, he paused in the act of rising, in utter astonishment. For the dark eyes looking into his were full of unshed tears which, even as he gazed, brimmed over and fell with a splash on the red gown, the lips were trembling, the cheeks were pale as death. He sat down again immediately, suddenly pale himself.

"Andy!" he exclaimed.

It was the first time he had called her by that name, yet neither noticed the event.

"Yes, I'm crying," Andy burst out, feeling for her pocket-handkerchief, and when she found none, letting her tears flow unchecked. "I'm crying, because I cannot bear that your music is done and over. . . . Yes, I know," she went

on as he would have spoken. "Don't speak to me. I'm not worthy—for you see I'm just—earthly—but I'm going to try—I *will* try—to get past this too—I'm going now to pray that——"

The last words were inaudible.

She was gone, and her bedroom door had closed behind her.

She had not all gone, however. On the floor near where she had been sitting was the missing handkerchief—a flimsy thing of lace and cambric. He picked it up. It was still warm from her bosom, and it had a faint scent of violets—an earthly scent. Yet, holding it in his hands, he had all but pressed it to his lips, when full remembrance came to him, and, snatching it away again, he laid it down and hastened out.

Andy by this time was on her knees in her darkened room, at a chair by the open window, regardless of the rain beating in upon her.

"God Almighty," she besought, "Thou Who art infinitely great, infinitely high, infinitely powerful, release me too from my earthly self . . ."

CHAPTER XIV

IN WHICH, AMONGST OTHER THINGS, SOME ACCOUNT IS GIVEN OF THE WEDDING OF YOUNG ELLEN

It was the day after this that Mrs. Abercrombie arrived, and, from the time of her coming until the wedding next day, she was the centre of activity. Even where she was not, the whole Dove-cote seemed to feel her presence and to be as Mrs. Binnie said, the brighter and the jollier for it.

"Though Lord kens," said the bride, "it's no' very jolly I'm feelin'."

"Hoots havers, lassie, it's jist the weather," said her Aunt, who was in her element in the midst of preparations.

The wedding was fixed for half-past five to suit the convenience of Mr. MacKendrick the station-master, who not only was to be best man himself, but was to bring with him a cousin of his own in the ministry—and always referred to as Cousin Wanless—who, in the absence of the local clergy, had consented to perform the ceremony.

"Sic' a like hour!" said Young Ellen. "It's neither one thing nor the other."

Such as it was, it came, however, and with it Mr. Dunwiddie in his elder's coat, with a white carnation in his button-hole, which had been provided by Mrs. Abercrombie. A bouquet for the bride had also been provided by her, and flowers for the sitting-room, which was to be the scene of the ceremony.

"An' it's awful kind, I'm sure," said Young Ellen to her Aunt after she had seen them, "but I wish they'd no' a'

been white flowers. It mak's it mair like a funeral than a weddin'."

And really it cannot be denied that it did. The gloom without and the gloom within were matched by the gloom of Mr. Wanless. The bride wept from start to finish, and the bridegroom had the grim appearance of one determined at all costs to endure. Even Mrs. Abercrombie, constrained to be silent, could, during the ceremony, do nothing to enliven things, and the wedding march, though Ascher duly played it, sounded almost grotesque, it was so incongruous. From outside also there was no help. The village, by order of Mr. Dunwiddie, had not been made aware of the event taking place in its midst. He had said that he felt that any demonstrations of joy would be out of place both in the state of the weather and that of the community's health. The real fact of the matter was, however, that, not even now being absolutely certain of Young Ellen, he thought it better to be on the safe side, and not to risk any public affront. Even Kate Lamb, his housekeeper, knew nothing of what was going on.

"But my dear man," Mrs. Abercrombie had said when he had told her this, "you're going home immediately, aren't you? What will you do about the arrangements?"

"Jist as I would have had to do anyway, M'm," Mr. Dunwiddie had replied. "She's that thrawn she'll be better prepared to receive us if she kens nothing, than if I'd told her."

"Isn't he delicious?" Mrs. Abercrombie had added, when she was relating this to Andy, as they stood waiting after the ceremony to be summoned to the bridal feast downstairs. "Do you know he dressed here, so that Kate Lamb might have no inkling. And she's over there now. I saw her from my bedroom-window, standing looking out into the rain as bored as possible, and thinking nothing's ever going to happen to her. I find the situation piquant."

Andy laughed at this with the bitter mirth of one to whom nothing more *can* happen. . . . That day, her last it

seemed to her, for beyond it all was dark, was passing swiftly and more swiftly. Till the hour of the ceremony she had not seen Ascher, and now she had heard him play for the last time, the wedding march from Lohengrin—strange finale—strange mockery—and was aware, though she could not see him from where she stood, that he was at the other window, silent, aloof, absorbed in his own soul probably.

And this was to be the end.

In the morning she must go—without word or sign. . . . No . . . that was impossible. He would think it strange, at all events Mr. Carruthers would. She must say good-bye after the feast, lightly—with some jest suitable to the occasion—say it anyhow—God helping her—as though it were not for ever. . . .

The Investigator, contrary to expectation, had remembered the ceremony and come in time. He had even submitted to have a white chrysanthemum put in his buttonhole by Mrs. Abercrombie. Nothing, however, would induce him to be present at the bridal feast.

"Don't ask me, my dear Ascher," he had said, when Mrs. Abercrombie sent after him to see if he would not reconsider his decision. "If it hadn't been for that Wanless man I would have come. But, for the sake of all parties, as our good Mrs. Binnie says, don't bring me into contact again with that man Wanless."

Ascher therefore went back alone. But he, too, was in no hurry to meet the man Wanless, or indeed to meet anybody in all the world. His surging thoughts, and one wonderful memory that stirred him to the depths of his being, were for the moment sufficient company.

The rain had ceased for the first time for days, and in the garden were cool twilight and the scent of the earth, and, as he stood dreaming, a breath as of spring-time came from the woods, laden with the fragrance of the fir-trees. . . .

The bridal feast, meanwhile, was beginning in the kit-

chen. Curtains had been drawn across the window, the lamp was lit, the table was laden with good things, and, for the first time, a feeling of festivity seemed to be present among the guests.

"Really, my dear," Mrs. Abercrombie had confided to Andy on their way downstairs, "in all my experience I never found a party so hard to get going. Though they are so few, they must weigh—mentally—tons."

A surprise was in store for her, however. She had not reckoned with Cousin Wanless, who was, though she had not known it, a man of moods, and had become, since she had last seen him at the ceremony, as cheerful as before he had been gloomy.

Cousin Wanless was really an excellent man, kindness itself to his parishioners, and the most debonair of bachelors. In certain circles he was considered both a beau and a wit, and was accustomed to be the life and soul of choir teas and church soirées. It was unfortunate for him that the entertainment at which he was now about to preside was neither the one nor the other, and still more unfortunate for him that he was totally unaware of his misfortune. There was something pathetic in Cousin Wanless's attitude of mind that evening. He, however, did not feel the least pathetic. He felt inclined to be frisky, and to receive with a levity which was both disconcerting and alarming the information that the gentry were also to be of the party.

Mrs. Abercrombie had, of course, invited herself as well as her fellow-boarders to the feast. Mrs. Binnie and Young Ellen would never have thought of taking it upon themselves to do so, and, while highly sensible of the honour conferred upon them, the whole company with one exception would have preferred their absence to their presence.

The one exception was Cousin Wanless.

"Indeed I would have thought it very strange if they had not come," he said to his cousin-in-law Mrs. MacKendrick in answer to some remarks she made. "What are you afraid of? I who associate with the upper classes every

day can tell you that the higher they are in the social scale the easier they are to get on with."

"Are they?" said Mrs. MacKendrick, and she was glad at least that Cousin Wanless was pleased, for, so far, she felt that the entertainment had hardly been on a level with her brother's importance.

She knew he was pleased by a way he had of echoing himself after he had ceased speaking and, regardless of any interruption, repeating his last phrase like a cue for the next.

"Easier they are to get on with," he proceeded. "As the duke said to me the other day——"

But what the duke said will perhaps never be known to Mrs. MacKendrick, for at that moment Mrs. Abercrombie in her black silk, followed by Andy in her red gown, entered.

Cousin Wanless had already seated himself at the end of the table, and now thumped upon it with his knife-handle to show that he was master of the situation.

"Come away, ladies," he said in an encouraging and hail-fellow-well-met manner that made Mrs. Binnie's flesh creep, while the bridegroom, scarlet with confusion, rose from his seat and Mr. MacKendrick followed his example.

"Move you away now, Mary," continued Cousin Wanless in a loud jovial voice. "I don't want an old woman like you. I want the belle next to me!"

"And quite right too, sir," said Mrs. Abercrombie immediately, though she had become rather pinker than usual, and in her eyes there was a certain amount of glint. "It's the minister's prerogative. Come along, Young Ellen."

She beckoned to the bride who was standing sharing her husband's mortification at the other side of the table, and Young Ellen had taken a step forward to obey Mrs. Abercrombie, when the knife-handle thumped again.

"No, no," said Cousin Wanless. "No brides for me, thanks. I've done my duty by the bride already: let her husband attend to her. Eh, Dunwiddie? You attend to

her. It's your turn now. As for me, I'm out now to enjoy myself. It's the young lady in the red dress *I* want."

At this Mr. Dunwiddie turned petunia colour, and his bride was seen to be on the verge of tears.

To their astonishment and grateful delight, however, Mrs. Abercrombie and Andy both laughed.

"Take the seat of honour, Andy," said Mrs. Abercrombie gaily.

"With pleasure," said Andy at once, and took it.

It was as she was doing so that Ascher entered.

His entrance provided Cousin Wanless with another opportunity.

"Come away, sir," he exclaimed, with a genial grin. "Come away as soon as ye like now, for you've lost your chance of gettin' to sit beside this red, red rose that's early sprung in June, here."

Thus said poor Cousin Wanless, blundering all unawares into a holy of holies. To Ascher, coming straight from the garden and his thoughts, the speech and the grin together were nothing short of sacrilege.

His face blanched and his eyes blazed.

"If you are referring to Miss Kinross, sir," he said, before Mrs. Abercrombie could stop him, "I shall be obliged if you will call her by her own name."

The company sat petrified. Even Mrs. Abercrombie was silent.

"It seemed best just to let things take their course," she said afterwards.

Cousin Wanless, held up in mid-career, remained for a moment absolutely speechless. Then catching sight, with the tail of his eye, of Mrs. MacKendrick's blank face, he pulled himself together.

"*You* would be obliged?" he said with unmistakable emphasis.

"We would all be obliged," said Ascher quietly, controlling an almost overwhelming desire to smite Cousin Wanless

across the mouth. "We are none of us accustomed to hear Miss Kinross spoken of in that familiar manner."

Here there was another silence, but it only lasted about a second, for, before Cousin Wanless could think of a retort, Mrs. Abercrombie intervened.

"Shall we begin?" she said cheerfully, and as she spoke she beckoned Ascher to the seat next to her and nodded to Mrs. Binnie, who promptly asked the other combatant to say grace.

During this armistice, Mrs. Abercrombie racked her brains for subjects of conversation, anticipating that a large number would be required. They were, for they had constantly to be changed, because no one spoke for a time besides herself, but Ascher and Cousin Wanless, who seemed to find in every topic introduced some point upon which they differed.

At last, however, she remembered the Joint Enterprise, and, wondering that she had not thought of it before, she immediately introduced it. Here at last, she was certain, was something that would interest the entire company, and bring forward the bridegroom out of his unseasonable obscurity.

Andy had been doing her best to second Mrs. Abercrombie, but for two reasons her conversational efforts had not been attended with their usual success. For one thing Cousin Wanless, either through fear of Ascher's lowering appearance, or because he considered her the cause of his mortification, spoke to her no more and hardly answered when she spoke to him. For another thing, since Ascher's outburst, she had been longing to get away by herself to think about it. She had been comparing the Ascher who had sat opposite to her by the fire the night before telling her of the Quest and of the beginning of his new era in which music and she were to have no part, with the Ascher of a few minutes ago, who had stood facing Cousin Wanless blazing with anger. She was conscious of a sudden mad hope. Lest the thoughts of her heart should be plain

to see, however, she did not dare so much as to look in Ascher's direction, and it was not till near the end of the feast that their eyes met at last for one long moment.

Then, however, remembering his as they had been the night before, vague, mystical, unearthly, she could have laughed aloud in reckless happiness, for they were now as she never before had seen them. . . . Her own fell before them. . . .

She turned hastily to talk to Mr. MacKendrick.

Mr. MacKendrick, however, had just received a question from Mrs. Abercrombie, and was in the act of answering it.

Andy began listening idly, glad not to have the trouble of talking.

"No, M'm," Mr. MacKendrick was saying. "I can't say we've seen anything about Longshaws yet."

"Have you seen anything here, Mrs. Binnie?" was the next question.

"No, M'm," said Mrs. Binnie, who had been rendered monosyllabic by the Wanless episode.

"Have you, Mrs. Dunwiddie?" Mrs. Abercrombie went on undaunted, and making use for the first time of the bride's new name.

The effect was happy. The spirits of the company revived, and eager talk began all round the table. Only Ascher and Andy were silent. Ascher because he was plunged in his own thoughts, Andy because of her ignorance, for amongst all the things of which she and Mrs. Abercrombie had talked since her return from Cock-malone, the enterprise of Mr. Dunwiddie had, by some chance, never been mentioned.

"What are they all talking of?" she said to Mr. MacKendrick the first time she saw any prospect of being heard and listened to. Every one had happened to stop talking at the same moment.

"The German that's hidin' hereabouts," said Mr. MacKendrick.

The words sounded out clear and distinct. Andy for a moment felt physically sick, as though something cold had gripped her heart and all but stopped its beating. But a moment later it bounded on again, for Ascher had begun to speak.

"Did you say a German?" he said, addressing Mr. MacKendrick.

Andy looked up at him, trembling. Though very pale he was outwardly calm, but, as he waited for the answer to his question, he poured some water into a glass and drank it.

"Yes, sir," said the chief special constable. "An' one o' the wiliest o' the lot I'm thinkin', for though it's weeks now since I had warnin' o' him sneakin' into the place, I've never yet been able to lay my hands on him."

"Weeks, did you say?" said Ascher. "How many weeks?"

"Mr. Dunwiddie heard first the very night we came," Mrs. Abercrombie explained. "Indeed he took me for the German!"

She laughed, and a ripple of laughter went round the table. It stopped, however, at Ascher, and at Andy, whose eyes had never left his face.

"Who sent the warning?" he said quietly.

"Ah, that I canna tell ye," said Mr. Dunwiddie; "but I can show ye the paper if ye like, sir. I cairry it always with me."

With those words he took a little note-book out of his waistcoat pocket, and from it produced Big Janet's manuscript.

Then handing it over to Ascher—

"Read it oot, sir, if ye please," he said. "There's some here that hasna seen it, an' it would be as well for them to hear it."

Ascher took the paper, and unfolding it he laid it upon the table before him. Andy wondered at this, till she saw how his hands were trembling.

He could, indeed, not have held it steadily. As it was, the words, in clumsy print, unequal, blotted, swam for a moment before his eyes.

"Will I read it for ye?" said Cousin Wanless as he hesitated. "I'm accustomed to reading manuscript."

"Oh, surely you don't read your sermons, do you, Mr. Wanless?" said Mrs. Abercrombie, at which there was some laughter. In the midst of it Ascher began.

"To the Chief of the Special Constables, Wood End," he read steadily. "Look out for an Enemy Alien. This is urgent and important, and is a sure message from one who knows but does not wish to be known."

Here he paused suddenly for a moment. Then—

"Rathness, Eastshire," he went on hoarsely, "16th October 1918."

"Thank you," he said, handing the paper back to Mr. Dunwiddie. Then, laughing, he turned to Mrs. Abercrombie.

"Strange, isn't it," he said, "the warning came from Rathness."

His eyes were wild, but no one noticed them but Andy, least of all Mrs. Abercrombie, who was talking now to Mrs. Binnie.

Ascher turned to Mrs. MacKendrick, who was on his left.

"And you are all helping Mr. Dunwiddie are you," he said, "to hunt down this man?"

"Oh yes, sir," said Mrs. MacKendrick. "There's a ring all round the woods. We can't be long now. Indeed——"

Here, however, Mrs. Abercrombie, who wanted to get nearer Mrs. Binnie, as she could not hear what she was saying, rose from her seat, and this was taken as the signal for all to rise.

Cousin Wanless, who was again bored, now that the feast was over, suggested that the time was getting on, and asked Mrs. MacKendrick, in an audible voice, when would the bride and bridegroom be starting? To this Mr. Dunwiddie,

with the vision of Kate Lamb before his eyes, replied that, contrary to custom, the bride and bridegroom would see their guests off first.

Mr. Wanless rejoined that, in that case, the sooner they went off the better, since they were preventing their good friends beginning their honeymoon which, he added facetiously, he now saw awaiting them up above the tops of the trees. . . . Mrs. MacKendrick then remarked that that was a mercy, for she had wondered how the station cab would ever manage in the dark. Somebody else said that it would be a fine night for the Hunt. And, though they were all teetotal, Mrs. Abercrombie insisted upon standing them all a glass of whisky to drink the bride's health and confusion to the German.

It was at this point that it was discovered by the company at large that Ascher had left the room.

"He's gone round to see if Mr. Carruthers wants anything," said Young Ellen. "He told me."

"But he can't go yet," exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie. "Andy, dear, do run round and tell him to come and drink the bride's health. Get him to come, and James Carruthers, too, if possible," she added aside with characteristic urgency, as Andy, flinging a cloak of Mrs. Binnie's about her which she found in the little entrance-hall, obeyed her. . . .

Ascher had not waited to close the outer door of the other end. It stood open to the wall, as though flung violently back. The breath of spring had blown out the lamp that always stood on the table, and both the hall and the stairway were dark. Feeling her way, Andy went up the stair and, guided by the light streaming out from underneath it, she went towards the writing-room door. It, too, was ajar, but before she had time to push it wider open, that she might enter, she heard Mr. Carruthers say harshly, almost fiercely—

"By God I will not. What? Let you flee before a set

of numbskulls as though you were a common criminal? Never, Ascher!"

"You promised, sir," came Ascher's voice. "It was the condition of my staying—that, whenever I should wish to return to my country, you would lend me the means to do so."

"I was a fool to promise," said Mr. Carruthers. "I should have known better, but I know better now, and I beg you to stay, Ascher. Believe me, I am right. You are not yourself, you are excited, hysterical—let me judge for you. If the worst comes to the worst—I can arrange—I can explain everything. . . ."

"And be suspected—punished for harbouring an enemy alien?" cried Ascher. "No, sir—believe me—it is you who are not yourself. Your feeling of—of—friendship for me blinds you to your own position. But I—I see it clearly, sir—I should never have come here."

"Bosh!" exclaimed Mr. Carruthers. "We British are surely not all idiots. We surely can distinguish sometimes between what is and what is not. I know men myself—two or three at least—one a relation, and two students of my father's once—who are high up in affairs—in close touch with everything, and all three excellent chaps. They'll put us all right. Only be persuaded to stay, Ascher. . . . Good God, there is a life-work here before you!"

A short pause followed during which Andy, outside, leaning half-fainting against the passage wall, listened breathless for the answer.

It came at last.

"No, sir," said Ascher, his voice trembling for the first time. "I would give the world to stay, but I cannot."

There was another pause, and again Andy held her breath. It seemed to her as though Mr. Carruthers were never going to speak. But he, too, spoke at last.

"Why?" he said very quietly.

"Because I am not fit for the Quest," Ascher burst out passionately. "Because I would only clog and hamper you,

and drag your kind heart down and down through misery after misery. I am one of the damned, sir!"

"Nonsense, Ascher!" said Mr. Carruthers sharply. "You know what I think about that. . . . You are in love. That's what it is. In love"—he seemed to bark the last words at his companion—"with that girl Andy."

The girl Andy here slipped down by the wall and kneeled on the floor, being unable to stand any longer. She could still listen, however.

Ascher laughed a short laugh that seemed to end in a sob.

"In love," he exclaimed. "Is it what you call in love—this fire, this longing—this awful madness that makes the Quest, the whole beautiful world, even your friendship, sir, seem as nothing to me, if I have not Andy?"

"My poor boy," said Mr. Carruthers, and his voice had changed and softened. "My poor lad, since when have you known this?"

"My soul has known it always I think, sir," said Ascher. "She must have been my mate in some other happier life. I had, without knowing it, been waiting for her——"

"While she got engaged to some one else," said Mr. Carruthers abruptly.

Ascher laughed.

"Oh, that wouldn't have mattered," he said. "We had met late—but not too late perhaps—" he paused, then suddenly burst out with the former violence. "But yes," he exclaimed, "it was too late—five years too late."

"But she has not been engaged five years," said Mr. Carruthers.

Then he remembered.

"Ah, I see," he said.

"Five years ago," said Ascher, taking no notice of the interruption, "I could have gone to her—not worthy of her—no one on earth is worthy of her I think—but I could have gone as the son of a great nation to which it would have been no dishonour for her and her children to belong,

which had not earned the execration of the world and become outcast, alien—God, it is hard to be an alien!"

There was a moment's pause. Then—

"So that I cannot even ask her if she loves me," he said quietly, but to Andy it seemed as though she were hearing the still small voice after the tempest, more full of meaning, of bitter sorrow than all that had gone before. "I cannot even tell her that I love her."

"Ascher," said Mr. Carruthers, and his voice sounded strange and thick, "I know a little of what you are suffering. I too—love—notice—it is the present tense, Ascher—yet years ago, she whom I love—told me she could never love me."

"Sir!" exclaimed Ascher.

"I seem fated," said Mr. Carruthers, "not to find anyone—in this present existence—to be my mate—in any sense."

"Don't make it harder for me, sir," exclaimed Ascher. "You know I must go now."

"Yes," said Mr. Carruthers. "I know you must go now. In the first agonies of your sorrow you will be better, come what may—doing what you believe to be your duty. I will give you the money now. I will keep my promise. But swear, boy, that if you are ever free from this intolerable torment, you will come back to me and the Investigation."

"I swear it, sir," said Ascher, and she heard him moving across the room. She, in her place, moved also, rising to her feet, trembling but determined. . . . She heard Mr. Carruthers go over to his desk.

"The money is here," he said. "Since you must go—go at once—I cannot bear—" he stopped abruptly. "Go at once," he repeated. "You can walk to Wood End Station—there will be some train. You will find a way out somehow. . . . For my part I shall say that I sent you on a quest."

Andy heard the Investigator laugh bitterly as she went quietly and swiftly down the stair.

. . . . . .

Half an hour later Ascher had left the Dove-cote, taking with him only the money and the clothes he was wearing. As he stepped out on to the road, he could hear the guests in the act of dispersing, and Cousin Wanless, now unrestrained, making jokes in his sonorous bass voice. The station cab from Wood End—for it will be remembered there was no cab at Longshaws—was standing at the open door, with the lamplight streaming out upon it, and, between it and the door, he could see the bride and bridegroom standing together on the threshold waiting to see the last of their guests. They were talking happily in low voices, and, even as he looked across at them for the last time, he saw Young Ellen, when the driver's back was turned, slip her arm through Dunwiddie's, and the delighted Dunwiddie turn towards her. . . .

He was glad when a bend in the road prevented him seeing or hearing anything more of the Dove-cote. . . . Of Mrs. Abercrombie, of Andy he dared not think. All the energy of his mind, he felt, must now be concentrated on the task of getting back to where he belonged, of removing his contaminating presence out of the midst of these happy people. . . . As he trudged along wearily, for he realised suddenly that he was very tired, he thought of himself as he had been little more than two hours ago in the garden, breathing the fragrance of the woods, and it seemed to him as though he had been another being.

In the reading of the warning, in the holding of his own condemnation in his hand, he had received the last death-blow to his pride, he who but a moment before had looked into the eyes of Andy and seen strange, wonderful things. There was something horrible in the incident. . . . Then the paper itself. Who had sent it? That it was dated from Rathness, from the very night of his being there, added the last pang.

The only one who had recognised him, so far as he knew, was old Sandy, and that the betrayal should have come from old Sandy's cottage seemed almost more than he could

bear. That old Sandy himself should have betrayed him was very natural. His mind was gone. He would not know what he was doing. But David Craig—Big David—and Jess—was it possible? Jess, who had always made so much of him. . . .

There seemed to be no other solution to the mystery, however.

He tried to think that some one else might have recognised him, some one in the station, in the street. But his thoughts, though he thrust them forth, were unable to find other shelter, and flew back evermore to the little house among the dunes.

With his mind thus on the rack, any added claim upon his attention had become an unspeakable annoyance, and it was with a feeling of despair that he became aware first of quick light footsteps and then a woman in a dark cloak standing right in front of him and evidently waiting for him. It was as though some indifferent stranger had strayed by chance into a torture-chamber. Next moment, however, he had come to an abrupt standstill—speechless, almost senseless for the moment, for between the folds of the dark cloak he had seen a gleam of red in the moonlight.

"Andy—Miss Kinross. Can it be possible?" he whispered.

Without a word she came forward and would have taken his hand in hers—but he drew back from her.

"For God's sake," he said passionately, "do not touch me. You do not know what you are doing. You do not know who I am."

"I do," she said simply.

He was silent with incredulous amazement.

"You—know—?" he said at last, trembling.

"That you are a German—yes," she said. "I have known for days—for weeks—Mr. Carruthers told me before"—she drew a quick breath—"before I knew I loved you."

"Good God!" he whispered. Then again—"Good God!"

"Yes, God is good," she answered, forcing back her rising tears. "He has given us at least this hour, Martin —and me the chance to say—that, come what may, I am ready to follow you to death and beyond death."

"I cannot believe it," he said hoarsely. "I must be mad I think."

"Not now," she said quickly. "But you were mad before to think of going away, without telling me—without asking me. . . ."

"How do you know this?" he said, sudden realisation coming to him. "How did you know I was going away?"

"Because I listened," she said at once. "I heard every word you said to Mr. Carruthers—and—as you had made up your mind—I made up mine. I couldn't let you go—like that."

Her eyes brimmed over with tears in spite of her, but she dashed them away again.

"My Andy," he said quietly, but to her there seemed to be everything in those two words. Taking both her hands, he stood looking down at her mournfully, lingeringly, as though for remembrance.

She read her doom in his face, and her sense of his need of her, more even than her need of him, drove her for a moment frantic.

Suddenly, and without warning, she burst into wild sobbing, turning away from him, in an abandonment of grief.

An instant after, however, she had recovered, with a pang of horror at herself, for he had exclaimed hoarsely—

"For God's sake, don't do that!"

It was a cry for help, a cry of agony.

"Don't drag me lower than I am now," he implored. "You do not know what you are doing—what you might make me do— You who are—simply everything to me. . . ."

All that was fine in her rose in response to that breath-

less voice, to the fierce clasp of the cold hands, to the desperate appeal in the wild eyes.

"It is over," she said, looking up at him calmly again, though the tears were still running down her cheeks. "But let me come with you a little way, Martin."

He made no answer in words, but, taking her hand again, he drew it through his arm and held it in both of his. Then they went on together.

A path turned off just there into the wood, a short cut to the station, and mechanically they took it. Enough moonlight was falling through the leafless branches to show them the way, which was broad and mossy. The rain of the past week had saturated the ground, and their footsteps fell softly as on some rich thick carpet.

They went on in silence. It seemed to Andy as though already all had been said. And Ascher could not trust himself to speak, for, with all the joy of this wonderful revelation, was mingled the deepest despair he had felt yet.

Of what use he was saying to himself was Mr. Carruthers's comfort now—his assurances that all the disgrace and infamy would pass—be forgotten after long years—there was no comfort anywhere. Even God—what could God do for this? what had He done? what allowed to be done? He had permitted a crowned madman, an irresponsible human fiend, with his train, to trample in the dust this happiness. . . . The great darkness came down upon him as never before. . . . Andy, so near and dear, was all unconsciously goading him to madness—to forgetfulness of everything but that she loved him and was ready—if he but said the word—to go with him down to the depths.

They had come to an open space among the trees where the gurgle of a brook could be heard rushing in full flood between its banks, and the tall grey stems of giant beech trees stood pale and stately like great pillars. . . . It was the shrine, but Andy did not recognise it, though the fallen trunk was still there as on the day of the picnic.

She heard nothing, saw nothing, was conscious of nothing in earth or heaven, but of Ascher's presence and of the coming parting.

It was nearer than she thought.

Suddenly Ascher came to a standstill, and, once more crushing both her hands in his, pressed them passionately to his lips.

"Good-bye," he whispered. "Go now . . . for pity's sake, go quickly. . . ."

She could not speak, and turning away abruptly he went over to the fallen tree-trunk. There, sitting down, and leaning his elbows on his knees, he buried his face in his hands. . . .

She waited for a moment or two, torn with anguish.

"Good-bye, Martin," she said at last. "This side death —or on the other, I shall be yours always—waiting—watching. Good-bye, till we meet again."

But he said no word. And taking his silence for a command—there, alone in the moonlight—she, weeping, left him.

CHAPTER XV

IN WHICH MRS. ABERCROMBIE FINDS HERSELF ABSOLUTELY UP AGAINST IT

MR. DUNWIDDIE, it will be remembered, had relied upon his housekeeper, Kate Lamb, doing the unexpected thing. Even he, however, had not anticipated that when he and his bride arrived home she would have gone to bed after locking the front door by mistake. Her deafness of course precluded any hope of waking her, even had her bedroom not been in the attic over the back-shop, to which the only other access was by a high-walled garden, whose substantial green wooden door was also discovered to be locked. Undismayed, however, the bridegroom announced that, if Mrs. Binnie would lend him a ladder for a moment, he would not be five minutes in gaining admittance. The ladder was accordingly brought, and held in position not only by the two Ellens but by Mrs. Abercrombie, who also encouraged everybody all the time, but in stage whispers because of the villagers.

"One felt as though one were taking part in an elopement," she wrote afterwards to Archie. "You've no idea what a moon there was. And what a night it was altogether. One never would have guessed it was an ordinary home-coming. But Mr. Dunwiddie seems to be one of those people who never can do anything without something dramatic happening."

It took more than the five minutes he had given himself, however, for Mr. Dunwiddie to get into his abode, for when he reached the top of the wall, he found he had not remembered that there was no pear tree just there to climb

down the other side by. And as his bride, on hearing this, absolutely forbade him to drop, and as he was unwilling to retrace his steps down the ladder, he had to crawl along the top of the wall feeling with one foot at intervals until he did find a pear tree. He did get in at last, however, and not only opened the door to the bride but lifted her across the threshold, a thing which he admitted afterwards he never could have done had it not been for the exhilaration of the thought that there was no Kate Lamb looking on at him. At the same moment Mrs. Abercrombie, who had come prepared, broke a large cake of shortbread over the bride's head. Altogether, as she said afterwards, when she said farewell to the happy couple on the doorstep, it had been a delightful home-coming, and if Kate Lamb, who was a ward of Mr. Dunwiddie's and impossible to dismiss, still loomed ahead, they had, she reminded them, shown her that they could do without her, which, in the race for precedence, was a ripping start-off.

In this excitement Mrs. Abercrombie had forgotten all about Andy and Ascher, though she had been very annoyed with them for not returning from Mr. Carruthers's end in time to drink the toasts. On her return to the Dove-cote, however, in the company of Mrs. Binnie, and on hearing from her that, contrary to all appearance, for the festal table was still to be dismantled, there was nothing she could do to help her, Mrs. Abercrombie decided that, as the empty sitting-room with its fading white flowers was very dreary, and she felt moved to speak her mind to all three truants at the other end, she would take her knitting with her and step over.

James, with two other visitors there, could not possibly be engaged upon the Investigation at the moment. She felt in the mood too for society, for talk, for laughter, for exchanging reminiscences of the wedding, for giving an account of Mr. Dunwiddie on the wall, for, in short, doing anything rather than sitting down dull and solitary until bedtime.

Instead, however, of the voices she had expected to hear when she reached the other end, all was darkness and silence. The outer door, however, was standing open—back to the wall, and she groped her way up the stairs.

It seemed as though Mr. Carruthers had heard her coming, for she was startled to find him standing, as though he were awaiting her, at the open door of his writing-room, and, at the first sight of his face in the lamplight, the gay greeting she had had ready for him died on her lips.

"Something has happened," she said to herself. "Something dreadful has happened."

"Well, James," was all she said aloud, however, and she said it cheerfully enough though a little breathlessly.

"It is strange," said Mr. Carruthers, "I was just coming to see you—for I want to speak to you to-night—immediately."

"Tell me first," said Mrs. Abercrombie, the healthy red in her cheeks fading a little, "Is Andy Kinross here?"

She saw him start as she said the name, and her heart contracted with alarm, even before he said quickly and sharply—

"Miss Kinross here—no—why should she be here?"

"Because I sent her," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "I sent her after Ascher. He had gone away just as we were about to drink the toasts, and I sent her to fetch him. Do you mean to say she did not come?"

"No," said Mr. Carruthers.

"Yet I saw her start," said Mrs. Abercrombie.

"You saw her start," exclaimed Mr. Carruthers. "What time was that?"

"She ought to have been here only about five minutes after Ascher," said Mrs. Abercrombie.

There was a moment's pause. Then—

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Carruthers faintly.

"James," said Mrs. Abercrombie suddenly, "has this—what you have to tell me—anything to do with Andy?"

As she waited for his answer she felt all at once faint and giddy.

"Take a chair," said Mr. Carruthers, watching her, and moving across to the chair he turned it towards her. She took it and sat down, while he looked round vaguely as though for another, and, finding none, remained standing.

Mrs. Abercrombie motioned impatiently with her hand.

"The books, James," she said sharply.

He sat down on the books.

"Now," she said, "tell me. And James, remember I'm an old woman, tough in the fibre, and able to bear things, and for God's sake, if there's anything bad—don't beat about the bush."

"I won't," said James, "and the only reason that I haven't answered your first question is that I myself don't know the answer to it."

"Tell me the rest then," said Mrs. Abercrombie, "and let me judge."

"By God!" exclaimed James suddenly, "I only wish I had let you judge sooner."

"Sooner—" said Mrs. Abercrombie faintly. "Is it then —late for anything?"

"Yes," he said grimly. "It's late at least for me to begin making a clean breast of things to you now, I should have done it on the first night you came here, and from my heart I beg your pardon, Mrs. Abercrombie."

"You beg my pardon?" she exclaimed. "What for? . . . Don't drive me demented, man. Speak out, get on . . . speak out."

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Carruthers, bringing out everything with a rush, "for grossly deceiving you, for allowing you to deceive others, for permitting you to run the risk of suspicion and punishment—in short for—for not letting you know, Mrs. Abercrombie, that Ascher is a German."

For one long moment Mrs. Abercrombie sat as though she were turned to stone. Then her lips moved, and it

seemed to Mr. Carruthers that she tried to articulate the word Ascher. But no sound came from her.

Suddenly, however, she recovered her voice, while her cheeks flushed scarlet and lightnings flashed from her eyes. In her anger she seemed to have recovered her youth also. She flung back her head, her bosom heaved.

"She's a handsome old devil," said James to himself as he folded his arms and bent his head before the storm.

"So this is how you reward me, James Carruthers," she said, "for coming here to look after you—for offering to help you——"

She paused for a moment to consider her injury, but James, though he would have liked to do so, still thought it wiser to make no comment.

"For treating you as I have done," she went on, taking fire as usual at her own words, "for trusting to your word —for accepting your guarantee—for—for—in short looking upon you as an old friend and a gentleman."

"Mrs. Abercrombie—" began Mr. Carruthers.

But Mrs. Abercrombie took no notice.

"Of course I was warned before I came," she went on. "Your sister told me how impossible you were, how it was nothing to you whether Britain won or lost this war. . . ."

"I must protest," James burst out. "I neither said nor thought that."

"I don't care what you said or thought," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "You are selfish and self-centred and utterly unpatriotic—that's what you are, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself. And simply because you wanted Ascher to help you with your Investigation—which for all I know may be some other pro-German thing. . . ."

"Really, Mrs. Abercrombie—" interrupted James.

"You made a fool of me—simply a fool," she went on, dabbing her eyes.

"I deny it," said Mr. Carruthers firmly. "There were no fools in the matter. Your own kind heart guided you aright from the very first. Remember it was you who

brought Ascher to me. You had recognised him for yourself as an artist and a gentleman."

As Mrs. Abercrombie could not contradict this she passed it over.

"You might as well argue with an eel as with a woman," thought James, as she proceeded.

"To think," she said, "that I, the President of the Rathness Branch of the British Empire Union—and you know that, James—your sister must have told you—so that it is no use your denying it."

"I am not denying it," he said.

"That I—who had offered to help Mr. Dunwiddie to hunt down——"

Here she stopped short, a new and startling thought striking her.

"You surely don't mean to tell me," she exclaimed, "that Ascher is *the* German—the man the warning was about?"

James nodded.

"Good heavens!" said Mrs. Abercrombie.

Then after a moment—"So it is known," she said, "in Rathness as well as here, that, evening after evening, I have been entertaining——"

"No," said Mr. Carruthers. "So far as I can judge it is not known. But of course if I had known of the warning I should have acted differently, just as you, Mrs. Abercrombie, would yourself have acted differently, if you had allowed Ascher to explain who he was—as he tried to do, I believe, more than once on the first night he came to you."

"*If* I had allowed!" cried Mrs. Abercrombie. "He ought to have *insisted* upon explaining to me. But of course—what else could one expect of a German?"

"Mrs. Abercrombie," exclaimed Mr. Carruthers, starting up from his seat upon the books, "you may blackguard me as much as you like—I deserve it, and I can stand it, but I can *not* stand hearing Ascher blackguarded."

"James!" exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie, aghast at his

white face and quivering lips. This was a James Carruthers whom she had never before seen, and the sight gave her pause, even in the midst of her invective.

"It was my fault," he went on, "my fault entirely from beginning to end—for if he had not wanted to come to me—he would not have lived that night to reach your house—would not have allowed you to bring him here, would not have been persuaded to stay when he did come—yes—I wanted him for the Investigation, for before this orgie of blood and destruction and hate began, a friendship had grown up between us, one of those rare companionships that occur once in a life-time, and I wanted the boy—not only for the Investigation, but for myself."

He paused, and there followed a moment's silence.

Mrs. Abercrombie's brown eyes had grown as soft as they were hard before.

"James," she said, "I was unjust to you just now—unkind—cruel——"

"Not at all," he replied. "I deserved it—perhaps more than you think. But I would do everything over again to have him back—to save him from going down with his country to his doom. He is a German as you say—but, Mrs. Abercrombie, if you had been here in this room an hour ago and had heard him as I did, of his own free will, renouncing life and love because he was a German, you would feel as I do about it."

"Life and love?" said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Renouncing life and love?"

"I am giving him away of course in telling you this," said Mr. Carruthers. "I have no right to do so, but as I have been so wicked already a little more wickedness won't matter—and—I think you ought to know by the way—that I ought to tell you—that your Andy—Miss Kinross—has known for some time what his nationality was."

"*Andy*—has known?" exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie in a kind of whisper. "ANDY?"

"I thought it better to tell her," said Mr. Carruthers, "but

I asked her not to tell you as I wanted to keep Ascher here and did not want you in your official position as President of the Rathness Branch of that League—I forget what you call it—to have any responsibility in the matter."

"Really, James," exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie, her anger flaming up once more, "you are too considerate. I am extremely grateful, most indebted I am sure. But why—if I may be permitted to ask the question—why did you tell Andy? Why did you not spare her responsibility too?"

"Because," said James, "to do so would have been to assume too much myself."

"I should not have thought that you minded that," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "You did not hesitate before, it seems to me."

"No," said James, "but with Miss Kinross it was different. To be frank—since we are being frank—I was afraid that—seeing so much of him and having so much in common with him, she might—not knowing he was a German—fall in love with Ascher."

At this Mrs. Abercrombie, just as James had done before, started to her feet.

"Fall in love with Ascher?" she exclaimed. "Really, James, this is *too* much! Are you not aware that Andy is engaged to a British officer—my own nephew—Archie Abercrombie?"

"Yet such things have happened before," said James. "You yourself, Mrs. Abercrombie, before you knew that Ascher was not an Englishman, did not think it impossible. You know you didn't."

At this Mrs. Abercrombie's wrath, in spite of, nay, because of certain memories of her own thoughts upon this matter, rose suddenly to white heat.

"I will bandy no more words," she exclaimed. "You who cannot bear your German friend to be attacked, will understand that neither can I listen to your vile aspersions

on my future niece. . . . Good night. . . . You have behaved in a disgraceful manner. You ought—but you won't of course—you don't seem to be able to—to be thoroughly ashamed of yourself. One thing, however, I have to thank you for before I go—you have taught me never to trust again to people who have *no* standards!"

With these words she swept from the room, down the stairs, and out into the night, leaving the front door still flung wide as she had found it when she came in, while Mr. Carruthers, having followed her out on to the landing, remained there for some minutes looking after her, a prey to the direst indecision. At last, however, as though making up his mind, he returned to the writing-room, shut the door, and sat down.

"It isn't as if I really knew anything," he said to himself, "or really could tell her anything—and if I could—she doesn't deserve it."

. . . . . .

Mrs. Abercrombie meanwhile, before she reached Mrs. Binnie's door, was remembering a hundred questions that she ought, of course, to have asked before leaving—about Ascher—about why he was like an Englishman—about his coming—about all sorts of things.

Pride, however, forbade her to go back.

"Besides," she reminded herself, "it really is of no consequence since, according to James, we have seen the last of Ascher."

Even as the thought crossed her mind, however, she became aware of Mrs. Binnie standing in the doorway awaiting her, and something unusual in the manner of the old woman again gave her a sudden qualm of uneasiness.

"Is Miss Kinross here?" she said quickly.

"Yes, M'm," said Old Ellen. "She must ha' come in when we was over at the Dunwiddies. For she came down when I was clearin' the table an' asked me to give you this note when you came in, M'm."

"A note?" said Mrs. Abercrombie. "Has she gone to bed then?"

"Yes, M'm," said Mrs. Binnie. "She said to tell you that she was very tired and that the note would explain everything an' that she was leavin' here to-morrow mornin'."

"Leaving?" exclaimed Mrs. Abercrombie. "To-morrow morning?"

"I've jist been over orderin' the spring-cart to be here at seven for her, M'm," said Mrs. Binnie. "I hope," she added after a moment, "there's been nothing wrong, M'm —nothing to make her unhappy."

"Certainly not, Mrs. Binnie," said Mrs. Abercrombie, though in spite of herself her heart misgave her. "Certainly not. Miss Kinross did not intend to stay when she came, and if she had been unhappy she would not have stayed so long."

"I'm glad to hear that she was pleased, M'm," said Old Ellen; "but she was easy to please, she is a dear young lady, and I would ha' taken it as a sign o' bad luck comin' to the Dunwiddies if any mischancy thing had happened her on the night o' their weddin'."

"Well as nothing has happened we needn't talk of it any more, need we?" said Mrs. Abercrombie a little testily, for the note in her hand seemed to weigh like lead and burn with fire. "Good night, Mrs. Binnie," she added as she turned away, "I shall need nothing more—good night."

"Good night, M'm," said Mrs. Binnie, and she returned to her dismantling, determined, even if she should have to sit up half the night, not to leave any disorders for the morning.

Mrs. Abercrombie's first action on reaching the upper landing was to go to Andy's bedroom door and knock at it.

"She can't be asleep you know—already," she said to herself.

There was no answer, however, and softly trying the

handle, she found the door locked. She did not knock again. A sense of pique was upon her at the moment. It had been a shock to her confidence in and love for Andy to find that she had been a party to James's concealment of facts. . . . Not that she blamed Andy. It had been James's fault. But it had taken the bloom off the memory of their comradeship. . . . The day they had had in the wood together came back to her—Andy's little ebullition at breakfast—the shrine—the walk home. Then the time they had had together at the Forgans' cottage. But always the memory of Ascher intervened, and she fumed once more at the thought of having had him with them, a daily familiar friend. . . .

All these reflections, however, though they have taken some time to write down, flashed through her mind during the few seconds she took to cross the landing, enter her sitting-room, sit down in her chair, and put on her eye-glasses.

Then the letter wholly absorbed her.

Her face, as she read it, would have been an interesting study for a portrait-painter, interesting but distracting, for it changed from moment to moment.

Grim disapproval, deep concern, and a host of intermediate expressions merged at last into blank amazement.

"Good God!" she ejaculated softly, unconsciously using Ascher's words. "Good God!"

Then adjusting her pince-nez, which had fallen off, she began reading the letter all over again.

"Dear Aunt Em," it ran. "This is to tell you that I am going off to-morrow, and when you have read it I am sure that you will agree with me that this is best. My time here has been so wonderful—the most wonderful of all my life. I can only thank you, dear Aunt Em, for all your kindness to me, and oh, I do thank you. At the same time I know that you will be very angry with me when you have read this, and that it is best for us not to meet

again. Otherwise we might both say things—for we are both quick-tempered—that neither of us could ever forget.

"But I cannot go without telling you. Martin Ascher is a German. He is the German you are hunting for—the alien the warning from Rathness was sent about—yet I have come to love him as I have loved no other man on earth—as I did not know, Aunt Em, that it was possible to love. He was talking to Mr. Carruthers when you sent me over to bring him back, and I heard him say that because he was a German, he was going away without telling me that he loved me, and I had to go out and wait for him on the road, I could not help it, and tell him all that was in my heart. . . . We said good-bye then, we shall never meet again or hold any earthly communication ever more. But he is my soul's mate, and if never in this world, in other heights, other worlds, we shall meet again, Aunt Em. I know it. . . . Meantime he has gone to be true to his dishonoured country, and I am going to wait and watch and pray for him all my life. I have written to Archie. He knows everything. And I hope that he may soon find some better girl to take my place. Do not answer this. Do not write to me now. I must be alone with this new beginning, with the tragedy, the pain, the mystery of life revealed to me for the first time, and making me forget even nationality. . . . But think as kindly as you can of one who loves you dearly.—ANDY."

Here it will be necessary to describe only what Mrs. Abercrombie did, for what she thought is beyond description.

First she sat for a long time with folded arms gazing at the floor. Then, taking the letter, she tore it into little bits and flung it violently into the fire. Then rising, she went very quietly and listened for a short time intently at Andy's door. Then returning, she sat down again and thought for another quarter of an hour. Then getting her writing-case she began a letter to Archie which she tore up. Then another and another. It was when she had

finished one at last, and the clock had just struck the half-hour after ten, that Mrs. Abercrombie's mind, settling down again into something like its normal state of alertness and acuteness, saw, for the first time, another aspect of the case.

How about the hunt? How about the ring round the wood? The Dunwiddies, the MacKendricks, the Binnies? How was she to explain things? She who herself had brought the German to the place and introduced him as her friend to the chief special constable? How exonerate herself from suspicion, even blame, without exposing James—James, on whose account she had come? Really, she reflected, the predicament in which she found herself through the fault of James was becoming an impasse. The more she thought about it all, the more clearly she saw that.

It is curious that already she was more lenient towards Ascher. Andy's letter, though she had flung it in the fire, had had some effect. Visions came to her of the two at the piano together—of Ascher playing and Andy listening at the window in the far corner. . . . No, the more she thought about it all, the more clearly she saw that it was all James's fault. She could see how it was. He had persuaded Ascher to stay for a few days with him before passing on, and Andy had held him—strange, beautiful Andy—after all it was natural—though it was irritating, aggravating, impossible, unutterable—the very devil in fact!

It was true, too, that it was partly her own fault, though not for the world would she have admitted it to James. Ascher *had* tried to tell her—twice—three times on that first night.

Well, she had accepted him then as a perfect artist. Now, for her sins, she was to be forced to accept him as the supplanter of Archie, as Andy's perfect lover. No doubt this was romance. She would have liked to read about it in a book. She would have liked Heine to have written about it and Schumann to have composed it, and would have wept with sympathy probably, if some tenor with

tears in his voice had sung it to her. But to experience it was another thing—to have your beloved nephew mixed up in it was another thing. When the next quarter struck she was pacing the room like a caged lioness. She was seething with resentment at James, at Andy, but most of all at Ascher, whose presence had been the cause of everything. Why had he come at all? Having once come, who knew but that he might come again and marry Andy, and drag her off with him to that horrible country of his. It was all very well to talk about other worlds—but Germans had always been good at that sort of thing. Germans —here, however, she stopped pacing, and her thoughts for the moment stopped too, for there was a sound of voices in the room below—in the kitchen—Mrs. Binnie's and a man's voice. . . . The house, the woods outside, were so still that she could hear them quite well, though they seemed to be speaking in low tones. Only once Old Ellen exclaimed aloud. Then the man spoke on alone uninterrupted. Mrs. Abercrombie stood listening to the inarticulate murmur in a fever of curiosity. Was it Ascher come back? She stiffened as she stood. If he had, she would deal with him as befitted. . . .

But even as the thought crossed her mind, making her head lift, her eyes flash, and her hands clench again, she heard the kitchen door open, and soft heavy footsteps coming up the stairs. A moment later the door of the sitting-room opened, and Mrs. Binnie, her sleeves still rolled up, a towel still in her hand, appeared on the threshold.

At sight of her Mrs. Abercrombie suppressed an exclamation, not because of the disorder of her dress, though it was unheard of for her to appear upstairs in this guise, but because of her face, which was set like a pale mask. Old Ellen looked, for the moment, like the ghost of herself.

She could not speak, though her stiff lips moved. All she was able to do was to beckon.

Mrs. Abercrombie hastened forward, and in silence, like

her guide, she descended the stairs, a cold fear upon her of what might be awaiting her.

A tall man was standing by the table as they came in—a tall man with his back to the light, so that at first she did not recognise him. All she could be sure of was that it was not Ascher, and at this her heart gave a little throb of relief. Next moment, however, it thrilled painfully with surprise.

"Bob Lindsay!" she exclaimed. "Why, I thought you were in France!"

Old Ellen had hastily shut the door.

"Sit doon, Bob," she said. "Ye'll tell it better sittin'."

At the same moment she placed a chair for Mrs. Abercrombie.

"Sit down yourself, Mrs. Binnie," she said as she took it, "and let us hear what's the matter."

She tried to speak in an ordinary voice, but Bob's big silence filled her with alarm, his unexpected presence, the strangeness of his face, the mud plastered on his clothes, the thought of that day's event.

"I hope ye'll excuse me, M'm," said Old Ellen, even as the thought of the bride crossed Mrs. Abercrombie's mind, "but an awful thing's happened, M'm. I'm at my wits' end. Bob here's made a mistak', an' killed a man because o' Young Ellen."

There was a moment's silence, while Mrs. Abercrombie tried in vain to take this in.

"Killed a man?" she repeated at last. "Killed—and by mistake?"

It seemed too grotesque—too horrible—till she looked up at Bob again. Then she realised and believed. His wild eyes were staring defiance, but his lips were trembling.

"Ay, it's hard lines," he burst out. "They teach ye to kill oot there—they show ye how easy it is—they praise ye up for killin'. Lord bless ye, in the trenches I've killed dozens o' men—but here I'll ha' to swing for killin' *one*—an' him the wrang man!"

As he spoke the light came back into Mrs. Abercrombie's eyes, the colour to her cheeks, the energy to her intellect, which last, although, as James Carruthers had said, it was not a very deep one, could on occasion be eminently serviceable. Thus, while Mrs. Binnie could do nothing but wipe the perspiration from her face and the tears from her eyes, Mrs. Abercrombie had grasped enough of the situation to go on with. And on she went with it, to some purpose.

"Robert," she said, "sit down. I see your point of view, and I sympathise with you very sincerely. You are an example of what happens when young men with murderous instincts, which might otherwise never have come to light, have to be trained in the arts of war. For this you are not responsible. It is your misfortune, not your fault, that you are a murderer by nature, and have been shown, in the way of duty, how easy it is to kill."

"Eh, mercy, M'm," here exclaimed Mrs. Binnie, "dinna speak like that for the love o' God. D'ye no' see the lad's near greetin'?"

"Be silent, Mrs. Binnie," said Mrs. Abercrombie, as Bob, obeying a peremptory wave of her hand, took the chair indicated. "I do see that he is moved by what has happened, and I am glad to see it. It is for this reason that I have spoken as I have done. He is sorry for what has happened. He will not do it again. This has been a lesson to him. And I am inclined to help him."

"Eh, M'm! If ye could but jist think o' something!" exclaimed Mrs. Binnie. "There's nae hairm in him. I've kent him since afore he was born. But Young Ellen's ways o' daein' was enough to drive Job dementit, an' what she'll be noo when she hears o' this I dinna ken."

Old Ellen wrung her hands.

"Now, Mrs. Binnie," said Mrs. Abercrombie very firmly, "if we are to pull this off, you must control yourself. You seem to forget that as yet I have heard no particulars.

Surely it is more important that I should hear details, than that we should speculate upon Young Ellen's thoughts."

Turning then to Bob she said—

"First of all, Robert—tell me—why did you want to kill anybody?"

"She's told ye," said Bob sullenly enough, yet with a certain eagerness too, like some wild thing in sore straits responding to kindly treatment.

"Ah—Young Ellen," said Mrs. Abercrombie softly. "I understand. But—this man—had she other admirers then?"

"I thocht she had," said Bob.

"You thought she had—and this man—you—you—put to death," finished Mrs. Abercrombie hastily, "was one of these supposed admirers?"

"Yes."

"And how did you find out your mistake?"

"Twa ways," said Bob. "By the way he died, and by what Mrs. Binnie has just told me."

"By the way he died?" said Mrs. Abercrombie awe-stricken. "How did he die then?"

"D'ye ken the path that turns into the woods half a mile doon the road to Wood End Station?" said Bob. "A broad path that leads to an open space among beech trees —where there's a burn?"

"I know it," said Mrs. Abercrombie.

"Weel I was on that path no' very long syne. I dinna ken what time," said Bob, "but the moon was up—a full moon—I was on that path. I had been hidin' aboot for days—for I dinna need to gang back to France till the morn—to see what was up wi' Ellen. I never believed she would tak' Dunwiddie, an' I aye thocht there was somebody else—an' I thocht I kent wha that somebody was. I was waitin' aboot—when I saw her—at least I thocht it was her, me no' havin' heard onything, ye ken—an' she was jist the size, an' she had Mrs. Binnie's black cloak on an' the hood ower her head an' near ower her face as weel. She was

waitin' on the road, and in a wee while he cam' along from the Doo-cote way—an' they met there—on the road."

He paused as though in sombre recollection, but Mrs. Abercrombie made no remark. She had become very pale. Mrs. Binnie had dried her eyes for the time being, and was watching her.

"I couldna hear what they said," Bob went on at last, rousing himself; "but it made my blood boil enough withoot that—seein' him holdin' her hands, an' her greetin' an' lookin' up in his face. But I kept quiet an' waited, an' in a while they took my pathway."

"Your pathway?" said Mrs. Abercrombie almost in a whisper. "Do you mean the path to the—to the open space where the beeches are?"

"Ay," said Bob. "They came along slow. I had plenty time to get behind one o' the big trees. I chose a good place to sit, for I thocht I would ha' to wait long, for I was to do nothing while she was there. But it wasna long. I had hardly got settled, for I had got ahead too far an' had to come back—when I saw her awa' back doon the path an' him sittin' by himself on a tree-trunk that's lyin' there."

"I know, I know," said Mrs. Abercrombie.

"I waited till I was sure she was away," Bob went on huskily, "then, keepin' careful behind the trees, I made a roond till I had got near facin' him—then I cam' oot into the open, an' close up to where he was."

He paused.

"Go on," said Mrs. Abercrombie sharply.

"When I saw him, I knew I needna ha' been sae careful," said Bob. "He was sittin' wi' his face in his hands. He didna even see me when I cam' near."

Again he paused, but this time no one spoke.

"But," Bob went on again, "I was determined—thinkin' what I thocht, that he would ken wha killed him—and I stands within ten yairds an' I says—'Well, sir,' . . . jist to mak' him look up."

As he spoke Bob looked across the room at the wall, as though seeing again there what had happened an hour ago. In a moment, however, he went on again.

"He looks up—then stands up—an' I aims wi' the revolver an' fires, but it was me an' no' him that got the fricht then—for he opens his airms wide—an' laughs—an' throws back his head—an'—'God is good!' says he rejoicin' like, 'God is good!' "

"And—and you hit him, Bob?" said Mrs. Abercrombie, trembling. "You did not miss?"

"At ten yairds? no' likely," said Bob.

"But I mean—you killed him—killed him dead at once?" she urged.

"He never moved again," was the reply.

"And—and—is he lying there now?" said Mrs. Abercrombie, "in the—open space where the beech trees are?"

"Ay, I left him," said Bob recklessly. "I didna care wha saw him or me—all I wantit was to find Young Ellen, an' fling in her face what she had made o' me. I cam' here ragin' an' foamin'—for I was feared that things wasna what I had thocht someway—an' that made me waur. I cam' here," here he laughed wildly, "to find Young Ellen, that I had damned mysel' for, paired aff wi' auld Dunwiddie."

"Whisht—oh, whisht!" exclaimed Mrs. Binnie.

"Are ye feared I waken the happy couple in their bed over the way?" he laughed.

"No, no," said Mrs. Binnie breathlessly, "the young leddy—up the stair."

"Ay, I forgot," he said. "It was her that was—in the wood."

"Whisht!" said Old Ellen again, but Mrs. Abercrombie had heard.

"Mrs. Binnie," she said at once, "if we are to keep a grip upon this—this calamity, it must be all three together or not at all. Do you understand me? I see you have a Bible there on the dresser. Bring it here."

A large family Bible was brought accordingly and laid on the table between them.

"Place your hands upon it," said Mrs. Abercrombie, setting the example. There was plenty of room upon the brown leather cover for all three hands.

"Follow me now in this oath," said Mrs. Abercrombie then.

"I swear that as I hope to receive pardon from Almighty God for all sins done in the body, and to be thereafter received into Heaven, that no word shall ever be written or spoken by me of what has been or is to be done this night. So help me God.—Amen."

The other two repeated this after her, and, as they did not do it distinctly the first time, she made them do it again.

This over, she turned to Mrs. Binnie.

"Now," she said, "I am going to put on my out-door things, and I wish you, Mrs. Binnie, to do the same. I wish you also to take a clean sheet with you and some of the white flowers. Robert, Mrs. Binnie will tell you where you can find a spade."

Neither answered, nor moved, until she had left them and they could hear her quietly going up the stair.

Then all at once Old Ellen, throwing her apron over her head, began sobbing silently and bitterly.

"Ye'd better stop that," said Bob roughly, "an' tell me where the spade is. Stop it," he said again, "it's for your sake as weel as mine I'm speakin'."

"I ken, I ken," said Old Ellen, removing her apron again and recovering herself by a supreme effort. "But she's an awful woman."

"She is that," said Bob; "and it's jist as weel for us that she is," he added.

When Mrs. Abercrombie came downstairs again she found the two standing waiting for her in the kitchen, with all that she had required. They were talking together in whispers as she came in, and at once Mrs. Binnie spoke.

"Mrs. Abercrombie, M'm, afore we start," she said, "there's jist one thing I would like to ken. The gentleman that's—dead—was my lodger. What'll happen to me if there's ony inquiry aboot him?"

"There will be no inquiry," said Mrs. Abercrombie, "and if there is, we have two witnesses to prove that he left Wood End of his own accord to go on a long journey."

"Two witnesses?" repeated Mrs. Binnie blankly.

"Yes," said Mrs. Abercrombie, "Mr. Carruthers and Miss Kinross. Mr. Carruthers will be informing you in the morning of the fact, that his friend had to leave unexpectedly. Miss Kinross told me the same in her letter. There will be no difficulty in that respect. Now let us go forward."

. . . . . .

No word was spoken again between them. But for the sound of their footsteps they might have been three ghosts walking down the road together. When they left the road at last and turned into the path even the sound of their footsteps ceased, and it was in a silence, broken only by Mrs. Binnie's heavy breathing, that they at last arrived at their destination.

Ascher was lying where he had fallen, on the mossy ground near the tree-trunk where he had been sitting. One arm was flung back over his head as though in triumph, or in greeting to the Great Deliverer.

Mrs. Abercrombie had not expected to see him so youthful and happy-looking. In the moonlight the streaks of grey in his fair hair were not seen—his eyes were closed as though in ecstasy—a smile of rapture was on his lips. . . .

She turned away.

"Go on," she said sharply to Bob, who stood awaiting her orders. "Back there—among the beech trees—where the ground is soft."

"Yes, M'm," he said.

Then a long time passed. Mrs. Abercrombie sat down,

while Mrs. Binnie, with the tears rolling down her cheeks, did the part she had come to do. From time to time she looked over to where Mrs. Abercrombie, with one hand shading her eyes, sat aloof on the tree-trunk.

Once she went over to her.

"There's money on him," she said—"a pocket-book."

"Bring it to me," said Mrs. Abercrombie. "I will see to it."

"She's an awful woman," said Mrs. Binnie to herself once more.

When she had finished her task she went over again to the stolid figure.

"Would ye no' like to see him?" she said.

There was wonder as well as reproach in her voice.

"I suppose I must," said Mrs. Abercrombie to herself.

"Very well," she said aloud, and she rose and came over to where Ascher lay, robed all in white and on his breast the flowers from the wedding feast that had seen him full of passionate life only a few hours before, yet had survived him.

The smile was still on his lips, his hair had been smoothed back.

"Eh—he's bonny—he's bonny," said Mrs. Binnie with a sob.

"Ask Robert if he is nearly ready," was all Mrs. Abercrombie answered.

But Bob was some distance off, and when Mrs. Binnie was well on her way to him—down dropped Mrs. Abercrombie on her knees.

Then, bursting into a storm of tears, she tenderly kissed the cold forehead.

"Poor boy, poor boy," she whispered.

But Mrs. Binnie, returning, found her seated once more on her tree-trunk.

. . . . . .

Thinking it all over afterwards quietly in her kitchen, when Bob had been to France and back again and become

engaged to another woman, Mrs. Binnie concluded that the most awesome thing about that awesome funeral was the heathen sermon at it.

It had been delivered after all was over by Mrs. Abercrombie standing at the head of the grave, and, being carried away as usual by the words, she had declaimed it after the first line or two in a voice which seemed to Mrs. Binnie too audible. Therefore, what with not understanding the half of it and being in terror of it being overheard by some passer-by as well, it had totally escaped Mrs. Binnie's memory, and she could not even think what it had been about. All she knew was that it had been in rhyme, and she supposed Mrs. Abercrombie had made it up, but whether it had been extempore or not she could never be quite certain.

The reader shall judge. What Mrs. Abercrombie had said was—

Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep—
He hath awaken'd from the dream of life—
'Tis we, who, lost in stormy visions, keep
With phantoms an unprofitable strife,
And in mad trance strike with our spirit's knife
Invulnerable nothings—*We* decay
Like corpses in a charnel; fear and grief
Convulse us and consume us day by day,
And cold hopes swarm like worms within our living clay.

He has outsoar'd the shadow of our night;
Envy and calumny, and hate and pain,
And that unrest which men miscall delight,
Can touch him not and torture not again;
From the contagion of the world's slow stain
He is secure and now can never mourn
A heart grown cold, a head grown grey in vain;
Nor, when the spirit's self has ceased to burn,
With sparkless ashes load an unlamented urn. . . .

The inheritors of unfulfill'd renown
Rose from their thrones, built beyond mortal thought,
Far in the Unapparent. Chatterton
Rose pale, his solemn agony had not
Yet faded from him; Sydney as he fought

And as he fell, and as he lived and loved,
Sublimely mild, a spirit without spot,
Arose; and Lucian, by his death approved:
Oblivion as they rose shrank like a thing reproved.

And many more, whose names on earth are dark,
But whose transmitted effluence cannot die
So long as fire outlives the parent spark,
Rose, robed in dazzling immortality.
"Thou art become as one of us," they cry. . . .

POSTSCRIPTS

I. Note from Mrs. Abercrombie to Mr. James Carruthers

"The Dove-cote, South,
"*November 1st*, 1918.

"Dear James,—I am sorry not to see you before I leave, but our last meeting was so painful that I feel you may not care to repeat the experience. I hope, however, that you will do an old friend the favour of accepting the enclosed cheque for fifty pounds.

"If I might suggest, I think a journey to Crete would be an immense help to the Investigation. But even if you do not agree with me, surely those big books you read must cost a great deal. Anyhow, if you need neither travelling exes or books, you *do* need another chair.—Yours very sincerely, Emmeline D'Orsay Abercrombie."

II. Letter from Miss Carruthers to her brother James

"The Rathe,
"Rathness, *November 3rd*, 1918.

"Dear James,—You will be surprised to hear that Big Janet died last night of influenza after three days' illness, during which she never spoke one word. Wasn't that like her?

"It has been an awful time, and I am quite worn out. My one comfort is that you are happy. I am sure the

Investigation must be getting on well now that you have had no interruptions.

"Mrs. Abercrombie, who, like the good soul she is, came in to see me last night, told me that, when last she saw you, you were more vigorous in your manner than she had ever seen you. This is more than I can say of her. Even after her long rest she looks more fatigued than the short railway journey would account for. She called a meeting, nevertheless, the day after she arrived, of the Rathness Branch of the British Empire League, and, I am told, she made another extraordinary speech at it, exhorting us all to stand out to the last for the utter destruction of the German Government, and especially of the Hohenzollerns, man, woman, and child, from the Kaiser himself down to his youngest grandchild, not only because of the harm they had done to us and to other nations, but most of all because of the evil they had wrought upon their own accursed people.

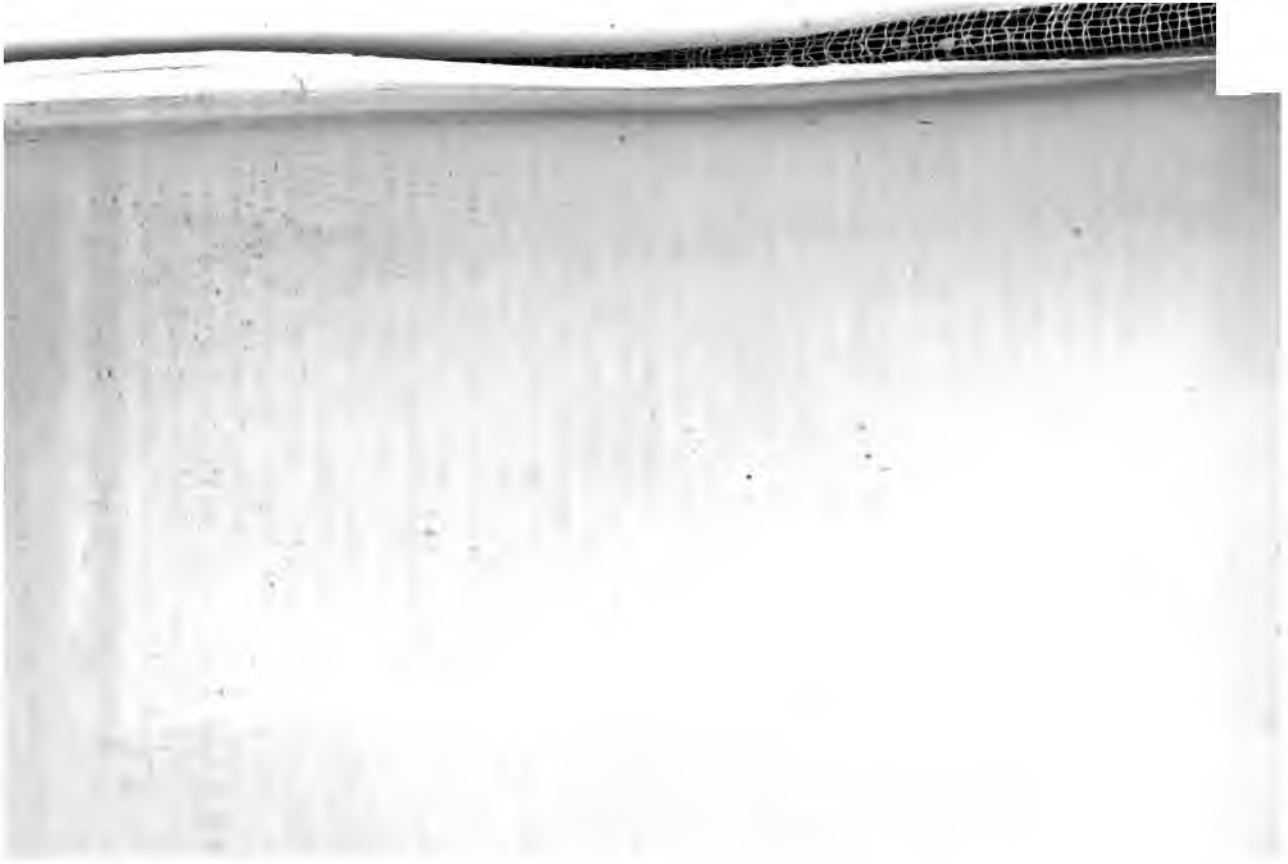
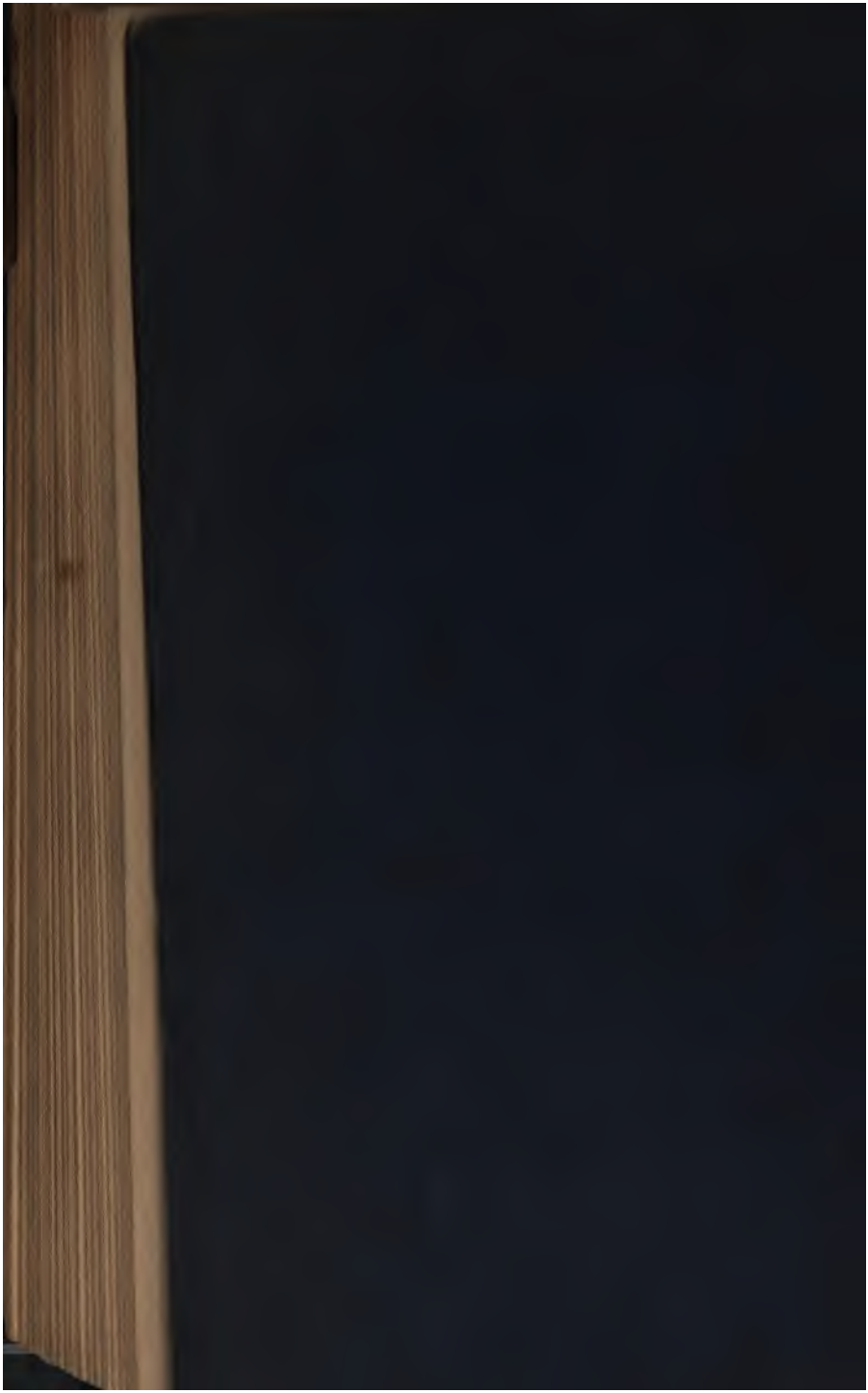
"Every one is talking about it, and wondering what she meant exactly. For my part, I am inclined to think that —poor dear—she is breaking up.

"But now that the war is so nearly over, what a comfort it is to know that soon we shall all have peace to break up at our leisure."

III. Entry by Mr. James Carruthers in his Day-book for November 4th, 1918

"I am now practically certain of it. I have been conscious for days of an inexplicable relief—a strange lightness and sense of peace. . . . Also to-day I received a cheque for fifty pounds—fifty pounds—the very sum I had given him away with him. It must have been a suggestion—strange thought—from the other side. And to-night I have had a Memory, for the first time for weeks . . . faint but unmistakable.

"At the same time my mind somehow seemed to be

steadied—prepared—indifferent, as never before, to all earthly interruptions.

"He is free. . . . He is helping me, from where there is naught hid, from beyond life and death, from some vantage-ground of Eternity."